

## WHAT IS YOGA? (\*)

**By Swami Paratparananda**

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In the broadly acknowledged pathways to God, to Peace and Blessedness, yoga is one. But this word yoga has been so freely used that by usage and tradition it has come to carry a wide variety of meanings often quite contrary to what is implied by its use in the religious literature — so much so that today the utterance of the word projects in the minds of the common man pictures quite inconsistent with religious life. On the other hand to those minds that are acquainted with the philosophical lore of India the word yoga invariably brings to the fore the name of Patanjali. For it was he who collected the thoughts that were extant and arranged them into a science. He clearly defined what it meant; codified the instructions as to how to practise it; stressed on the successive stages in its practice and lastly the goal one reached by having recourse to it. But he was by no means the originator of this science or philosophy. He only systematized the thoughts. The thoughts and instructions were already there as far back as the age of the Upanishads. The first regular treatment of this system of philosophy and its practice we come across in the *Svetasvataropanisad*. Yet, in spite of clear indications, in spite of all philosophy and all the scriptures which declare in unambiguous terms as to what is meant by yoga, the human mind has been associating yoga with something that is not religion, that is not yoga. Why?

First of all it must be remembered that man usually tries to follow the path of least resistance. And what is more natural to man than the life of the senses, the life in the gross material world? What is so alluring, and captivating as the phenomena of nature; the beauty of the sunrise, the grandeur of the midday sun when he burns fiercely and makes everyone take shelter inside thatched huts or cool places? What is so refreshing as the cool breeze of the evening when the sun has no more of that power? What is more natural than the entertainments one so cheaply comes across? In short what is more natural than the life of the senses? Most of the human species is satisfied with these things and if at all they exert, it is only to heighten the tempo of these pleasures and extend their duration. All the external sciences deal only with this part of the problem. The scientist wants to get over anxiety by amassing wealth, by procuring food and clothing in ever increasing quantities by subjecting nature to disgorge its secrets to him. Man by his natural bent of mind thus tries to think of everything in terms of utility. If yoga can make him live a hundred years enjoying sound health it is welcome. If it can give him power to rule over others, help him to name, fame and wealth it is not to be discarded, otherwise he shall shun it. He has no use for the things which have no material utility.

But this science of yoga deals with the perfection of man, to enable him to commune with the Divine; to make him perfect as 'the Father in heaven is perfect'. Here the object of his experimentation is not outside. It is the mind, ever fleeting and never restrained that he has to deal with. Here the gigantic or microscopic instruments, that man uses in the physical sciences, cannot reach. Here the senses cannot help him, rather the more turbulent the senses, the more stupendous impediments they are in his path. Yoga is a going inward; diving deep into our own minds; finding out the loop-holes through which it



seeks to suck in extraneous matter; plugging the loop-holes; throwing out, as it were, the putrefying matter, and cleansing the vessel of the mind to receive the nectar of Divine grace and enlightenment. It is a long process requiring immense patience of not one but several life-times and that is why people are afraid to take it up. Even a warrior like Arjuna cries out in despair that the mind is turbulent and uncontrollable. Hence it is not strange that a large part of the populace avoids the path.

The word yoga in Sanskrit has been used ordinarily in two senses one as concentration (*yuj samadhai*) and secondly as yoking, connecting or uniting (*yujir yoge*). Patanjali and the Upanishads preceding him mostly used it in the former sense. The Bhagavad Gita, however, makes use of it in both these senses.

Patanjali at the very outset defines what yoga is. He says: 'It is the restraining of the mind-stuff from undergoing modifications'. The question now is: Why should one restrain the workings of the mind? To attain peace, to go back to our original form which is Blessedness. What does one do, if one wants to retire to rest? Does one seek the market place or the quiet corner of one's humble cottage? Obviously the latter. Why? because the atmosphere in the market place is not conducive to rest. It seethes with activity and noise, no rest is possible there. Similarly if the mind stuff is seething like a cauldron taking in forms every second how can one have peace? Can a boat sail smoothly on a choppy sea? When a storm rages mountain-high breakers are raised in the ocean; chaos only prevails then. In a mind, disturbed by the storm of passions, disturbed by the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch presented to it by the various senses can there be serenity, can there be peace? The Kathopanishad in a telling manner emphasizes this idea:

'One who has not ceased from wicked actions, one who is not calm and collected, and one whose mind is not tranquilised that one cannot attain this Atman by the mere knowledge of Brahman.<sup>1</sup>'

Mind is like a wild horse unbroken, untamed. The rider on such a horse if he does not know how to break the horse and is not strong to control it, is sure to be thrown off with the consequent danger to his life and limbs. Swami Vivekananda gives, the mind the analogy of a monkey; 'How hard it is to control the mind! Well has it been compared to the maddened monkey. There was a monkey, restless by his own nature, as all monkeys are. As if that were not enough some one made him drink freely of wine, so that he became still more restless. Then a scorpion stung him. When a man is stung by a scorpion he jumps about for a whole day; so the poor monkey found his condition worse than ever. To complete his misery a demon entered into him. What language can describe the uncontrollable restlessness of that monkey? The human mind is like that monkey, incessantly active by its own nature; then it becomes drunk with the wine of desire, thus increasing its turbulence. After desire takes possession, comes the sting of the scorpion of jealousy of the success of others, and last of all the demon of pride enters the mind, making it think itself of all importance.'<sup>2</sup> Such a mind the yoga professes to control by a gradual process, rather, if we follow the process of yoga we will be able to control the mind, says the yogin.

What is the process? Patanjali says that *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi* are like the eight limbs of yoga. Yama and niyama are as it were its legs. They are the first to be practised: the moral disciplines like non-killing, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence, and non-receiving which are called yama;<sup>3</sup> cultivation of internal and external purity; contentment, austerity, study and worship of God, which are termed niyama<sup>4</sup>. All these efforts are for subduing the mind



which always runs riot. Sri Ramakrishna says, 'The upshot of the whole thing is that, no matter what path you follow, yoga is impossible unless the mind becomes quiet. The mind of a yogi is under his control; he is not under the control of the mind.' Sri Krishna exhorts: 'By constant practice and renunciation alone can the mind be controlled.'<sup>5</sup> Further, Sri Krishna is very definite that for a man of unbridled senses and of a dissipated mind yoga is an impossibility.<sup>6</sup>

We see from the above that the very foundation of spirituality is a moral and pure life in which there is no thought of self-aggrandisement, no thought of acquisition, no thought for one's own self. The efficacy of practising each one of the above mentioned disciplines has been described at great length by Patanjali in his *Yoga sutras* and they have been demonstrated in the life of very many saints and seers, but that is not in the purview of this essay. They only go to prove that yoga is a science which can be demonstrated. But the purpose of yoga is not to prove that it is a science but that it is a science that is to be utilized to reach the Highest, the Supreme.

Simultaneously with the practice of these moral disciplines, yama and niyama, one has to cultivate the other steps like pranayama and pratyahara. A person proceeding on this path meets with wonderful experiences after some time. Concentrating the mind on the nose he would smell wonderful fragrances, concentrating in between the eyebrows, he would see many beautiful sights. This says, Swami Vivekananda, is an indication that the aspirant has just commenced his journey. But he has to discard all these and proceed further. As he becomes more and more competent to concentrate, his capacity for dharana and dhyana (meditation) develops. A complete metamorphosis, as it were, takes place in the constitution of the aspirant. He begins to see extraordinary visions, and hear voices super-natural. His whole organism becomes well tuned to receive the finer manifestations.

Further on he comes in possession of wonderful powers. But these latter are the pitfalls into which unguided or misguided aspirants fall. They get enamoured of these powers. They think that by obtaining super-human and supernatural powers they have attained the goal. They slip from the path. Their attention is diverted from their declination. But this portends no good. A mountain climber is warned to be watchful of his steps. It is a narrow path that he treads. The scenes that unfold before him are marvellous and enchanting but if he heeds not the warning and proceeds on his path with his eyes diverted towards those wonderful sights and mind absorbed in the contemplation of the beauty he is sure to slip from the path into the bottomless chasm that stands yawning on the sides of the rugged path. Even more careful should one be in this spiritual path, which is sharp like the razor's edge.

Aspirants enamoured of these powers forget the purpose for which they gave up every-thing, the purpose for which they made bonfire of their desires. Or was there some desire still lurking in some inconspicuous corner of the heart? Infatuated with these powers they forget God and crave for material enjoyments, name and fame, the very things which they had discarded as useless and slip from the path and waste their life.

But is he completely lost? Do all his efforts go in vain like a scattered cloud? What happens to such a one who falls from the path even after sincerely seeking it in the beginning? A similar question was asked by Arjuna of Sri Krishna. But Sri Krishna replies, 'Never, does a man of benevolent action come to eternal grief. He, merited by his good acts, lives in higher regions for a long time and then takes birth in a pure and prosperous family or a family of spiritually advanced souls. There coming in contact with the knowledge he had acquired in the previous birth strives harder than before for perfection.'



Though no effort is lost, a fall from the path retards greatly one's progress towards the goal.

By making samyama or concentration on any object a yogi can know its secret. The whole nature is in the form of one open book before him. But Patanjali says this does not help the main purpose of the yogi. The temptations to test those powers come. They are the obstacles in his path. One who is able to resist and overcome temptations and persevere in his pursuit that one only can succeed, and none else.

Now in the Bhagavad Gita the word yoga is sometimes used in the sense of karma yoga also. The whole of the Gita is described as a treatise on Brahma Vidya and as a yoga shastra: a scripture that purports to unite the Jivatman with Paramatman or teaches the identity of Atman and Brahman; as such whatever path is described therein is a path towards God, is a yoga. There is nothing incongruous in calling these paths as yoga. Moreover, though in theory we can create water-tight compartments between Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Yoga, in practice a judicious blend of all these contributes to the healthy growth of the aspirant's nature and progress.

Having seen what Yoga is, we have to examine the credentials of what passes off for yoga in the world today. A physical culturist says he teaches yoga. What are the credentials of this yoga. It can make you strong; make you immune to diseases without a dose of drug. It can make you live long. It can make you really enjoy the material pleasures. In short it can make you concentrate all your energy on the body. But is that the purpose of real yoga? Health of course is imperative for the intensive spiritual sadhana but body is only an instrument and not an end in itself. One who gives all his attention and time to the body, when will he think of God? Therefore mere physical culture cannot be the yoga a religious aspirant desires to practise.

Next let us consider the claim that the possession of the miraculous powers — such as to travel through air, remain invisible, to walk on water and the like — is the criterion of yoga. If a yogi cannot or will not do these acrobatics, he does not impress the common run of men. A conversation some devotees had with Sri Ramakrishna expresses the typical attitude of the worldly-minded and the way they judge the eminence of a spiritual personality. One day the Master was talking with a person who had returned after a pilgrimage to Banaras. The person had met the great sadhu Trilinga Swami. Sri Ramakrishna who had also met him assigned him a very high place among the saints, but in the estimation of the worldly-minded he had lost his exalted state because he could not or would not perform miracles. The pertinent question of a true seeker at this stage should be: do the powers to perform miracles bring us nearer to God? Let us have the testimony of Sri Ramakrishna. Once Sri Ramakrishna asked Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda): 'My child as the result of practising austerities I have got all the supernatural powers, such as assuming the minute dimension of an atom etc. But I have no use for them. I am now thinking of asking the Mother to transfer all these to you. For She has told me that you will have to do much of Her work. If all these powers are imparted to you, you will be able to use them when necessary. What do you say?' Narendra put the counter question to the Master, 'Sir, will they help me in realizing God?' The Master replied, 'They might be of no help to you in that respect, but they stand you in good stead when you engage yourself in God's work after realizing Him.' Even then Narendra's reply was, 'Sir, I have no need of these things. Let me realize God first and then it will be decided whether to accept them or not.' The Master was testing Narendra by tempting him as it were but when the disciple stood the test, the Master was highly pleased. Here, in the categorical assertion of the Master there is



no room left for any doubt as to the uselessness of these powers in realizing God. The natural tendency of power is to corrupt man, to degrade him, as such a real seeker of God will not dabble in these supernatural powers. If at all he possesses them he will use them for the spiritual uplift of humanity and not for self-advertisement nor for personal gains. For him the highest gain is the realization of God, gaining which he considers not anything more covetable and established in which is not moved by the mightiest of calamities.<sup>7</sup>

Another misconception is that the power to communicate with the departed spirits is a highly advanced state in yoga. Apply the yardstick of progress towards God and what do we find? We will find ourselves miles away from the path of true spirituality in the darkest of woods without any path and without any light. It should therefore be, the duty of a true seeker of God to scrupulously and carefully avoid these so-called yogas and cultivate real love and longing for God without being enchanted by magic or mystery-mongering.

Now coming to the practice of Raja yoga there is the danger, says Swami Vivekananda, of a person being mentally deranged or becoming physically invalid if one plunges into it without the guidance of a competent Guru. The aspirant is to be practically under the observation and surveillance of the teacher until he reaches the goal or until the teacher thinks he can safely leave the aspirant to sail ahead under his own power. Such teachers are few and far between, the disciplines enjoined are rigorous and the period long and indefinite. Have we that enduring patience?

If not let us avoid such a path. For what is gained through this yoga can also be achieved with less danger by bhakti also. Sri Ramakrishna unequivocally assures us not from mere hearsay but by actual experience that: 'One may have the same kumbhaka through bhaktiyoga as well. The prana stops functioning through love of God too. In the Kirtan the musician sings, '*Nitai amar mata hati*'<sup>8</sup>. Repeating this, he goes into a spiritual mood and cannot sing the whole sentence. He simply sings, 'Hati! Hati!' When the mood deepens he sings only 'Ha! Ha!' Then his prana stops through ecstasy and kumbhaka follows.'

In reviewing we have: that yoga in the religious sense is not physical culture, is not in seances, is not manifesting of supernatural powers, is not mystery-mongering but the path which leads one to God. That none of these, take us anywhere near God has been testified by the scriptures, by saints, seers and Incarnations time and again. That which unites us with God that alone is yoga, all other things are of no value worth the mention. There are four paths which lead one to God, Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Yoga and each one can choose that which is fitted to his disposition or which the teacher by his intuitive knowledge thinks apt and suited to the aspirant's temperament. The first and last test of yoga therefore is whether it leads us Godward. If not it is not yoga but *bhoga* (enjoyment), or even *roga* (disease) and is to be discarded.

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<sup>1</sup> II.24.

<sup>2</sup> Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.1, p.174, Seventh Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Yoga sutras.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gita, VI.35.

<sup>6</sup> Gita, VI.36.

<sup>7</sup> Gita, VI.22.

<sup>8</sup> My Nitai dances like a mad elephant.



By Swami Paratparananda

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Nothing is so much sought after in this world and at the same time nothing is so eluding man's grasp as peace. Hundreds of conferences have been held for its accomplishment on a permanent basis since the last war. Every country that possesses nuclear weapons professes that the tests it conducts, the stocks it piles up and the increasing lethality of the weapons it produces are all for securing peace. But peace seems to be far far away. This is the world situation today.

In individual life too man amasses wealth, works incessantly and has progeny all with the fond hope that he may rest and enjoy peace in the evening of his life. But rarely is man successful. Maybe the man loses the power of his limbs or his sons turn ungrateful and prodigal or some such denouement overtakes him, and like the *ignis fatuus* peace recedes for ever from his grasp.

Naciketa in the Kathopanishad says to Yama: 'Man can never be satisfied by wealth. By seeing you we will have it in plenty. We shall live as long as you so command, but for me the boon I desire is that alone (the knowledge of the Self). For what fool is there who coming in contact with persons like you who are immune to old age and death will still ruminate on the short-lived colourful panorama and desire to live a life of sensual enjoyments for a long time.'<sup>1</sup>

In the life of the staunchest hedonist and excitement-mad person too a time comes when his nerves refuse to respond to the titillations offered. Depression then mocks him in the face. The day to day experience of a common man points out to us the insufficiency and in-competency of the body to enjoy and to cope with the increasing number of allurements the world holds out, without peril to body itself. King Bhartrihari in a pathetic strain cries out 'we did not enjoy the pleasures but were consumed ourselves by the desires.'<sup>2</sup>

After a hard day's labour when the time of rest draws nigh then the eye-lids care not our injunctions; the most beloved at that time appears as a shadow or is no more than a dream. Willy-nilly we slip into the arms of sleep, that panacea for all worries, but in the eyes of the matter-bound the impediment of all joys. Unfortunately the peace that man enjoys in sleep is short-lived. Either dreams encroach into its realm or the sordid reality of the work-a-day world perforce drags him back to wakefulness where all the horrible situations and painful remembrances which haunted him before await and welcome him with their hideous faces. What a piteous predicament?

Placed in such a situation is it too much to expect man pining for peace? What can bestow peace? Our scriptures declare that a pure life and a perfect character alone can guarantee peace. How to acquire such a character? Character is not formed in a day. It is a life-long process. It is the sum total of the impressions of our actions done in the past or present lives. A pure life therefore depends on certain fundamental principles of which



truth is one.

Truth plays a significant role in the formation of an individual's character and consequently the culture and advancement of society. For society is but an aggregate of individuals. The value of truth cannot be over-emphasized whether it be in the family life, or in social contacts; in national organization or in international communications. Its potentialities are immense. Like the mythical nectar it has the power to rejuvenate a worn down organism. It tears down all cowardliness and infuses great strength. It is the source of tremendous power, being the axis round which all virtues revolve and being the backbone of pure character.

What then is this truth that has so vast a hold, that has so complete a grip — to the point of obsession — on man? The common man's idea of truth is the verbal expression of an incident as it occurred or of a fact as it exists. There is another sense in which this word truth is used: that of adhering to the given word; to act as we say and to think as we speak. Everyone understands this. But how difficult do we not find to keep to truth? Suppose a man commits an offence, be it ever so trivial, his first reaction is to hide the offence, or to run away from the punishment and in case he is unable to do both, to shift the blame on to someone else. Naively does he think that a falsehood uttered to save himself from an embarrassing situation, innocuous to others -is harmless to himself. But there he commits the greatest error. In this way he beguiles himself. How is the man sure that he will be able to hold fast to truth when a greater calamity confronts him, even when he is not able to face a small embarrassing situation?

Falsehood is like the forbidden fruit. Once tasted it makes a slave of man by creating a longing to have recourse to it more and more. For does it not provide opportunities to live an easy and comfortable life without much exertion? Man, therefore, stoops not to conquer but to be vanquished. He bows not in humility, but in cupidity, and bends not in age but under the weighty burden of falsehood. There is an adage in the Indian languages: 'a man of deceit dies many a death before he takes his final leave of this world.'

How innocently do we not mix untruth freely in our speech, colour reports just to make them attractive. No doubt no mischief is contemplated in the beginning but what happens is that the habit persists and probably another time when it really injures another we cannot control ourselves from weaving webs of untruth into our narratives. That is the bane of walking into the trap of falsehood. Oftentimes we find that we have to spin yards of lies in order to support the original one. Further when man consistently lies his conscience becomes blunted. He no more feels for another; woe to the man who crosses his path or intercepts his interests. In his material pursuits he sinks lower and lower into the mire of hatred, for it requires tremendous moral courage to be magnanimous enough to own one's fault and accept the consequences with composure, whereas the other way seems so wide and strewn with flowers and bouquets.

We have in our Hindu literature two of the brightest examples of steadiness and steadfastness in truth: Sri Ramachandra and Harishchandra. Both were kings of great integrity. They never went back on their word even if it meant the greatest sacrifice. No price was too heavy for them when it concerned truth. Rama gave up his title to the throne on the day of his installation as heir to the kingdom and trod the forest path bereft of all retinue and stripped of all royal grandeur just to honour the promise extorted from his father by his step-mother. This was not all, true to the spirit of the promise, he never entered the gates of a town or enjoyed the comforts of a royal guest for the fourteen years he was under exile even when they were repeatedly and honourably offered to him.



Harishchandra gave up his kingdom to the sage, Viswamitra, as a gift and when he found that he had no money, — the royal treasury having already devolved to the sage under the gift — to pay as fees for the conveyance of the gift, he sold his wife and himself too to raise the requisite wealth. It is a tale full of pathos. A king turned overnight a beggar, a slave, with no right even on his own body. His son dies and the wife brings the body to the cremation ground. But as the guard of the ground, Harishchandra, demands the death duties before cremation. The poor mother wails in distress, for where could she procure money slave as she was? He recognises her but does not relent. Would he be untruthful to his master? Never. It is a melodrama. The emotions raised draw even from the hardest heart sighs of compassion and tears of sympathy from the driest orbs. The sage at that instant appears, restores to the king his kingdom and all. He is pleased to find the tenacity and persistence of the king to bear all catastrophies without a regret or murmur in the cause of truth. That is the ideal set before us even in the so-called secular life.

What then is the place of truth in religious life? In the real sense of the terms the life of a Hindu is not segmented as secular and religious. It is a one great offering to the Most High. The so-called secular is also lived in pursuance of the Ideal. Starting from his tutelage as a boy under the parents and later under his preceptor to the day he renounces the world the Hindu's life is a preparation, an equipping for the higher life, for dedication to God. Truth enjoys a paramount position throughout this preparatory stage. A boy of eight enters the teacher's abode. He is first taught to be steadfast in truth. His morning begins with incantations to Truth. He, with his teacher believes that truth alone protects them. Whatever value the sceptic moderns may assign to such repetitions and chantings, they had no doubt a salubrious effect on the boys of those days. For those were the days when education was imparted not for the sake of wealth, nor name, nor fame, nor even at the command of the sceptre nor in fear of the sword of haughty kings but with the sole object of benefiting society, through worthy students. No consideration other than the genuineness of the taught, and their worthiness to receive weighed with the teachers. The bond between them was that of mutual trust and love. The law that governed their relations was that of truth.

There is a striking instance of such a teacher, who humbled the pride of the mighty conqueror Alexander. Drawn to a scanty clad but serene looking man on the banks of a river, Alexander accosts him and pleads with him to accompany him to his land, definitely with the idea of learning the Wisdom of the East. The sage content with himself refuses all the great and grand things that Alexander offers. Annoyed and angered the conqueror threatens the sage with death. The sage smiles, but the words he spoke spat fire. 'You never uttered a more foolish thing' said he 'you may tear this frame but Me your sword cannot pierce. Me the fire cannot burn nor wind dry, for I am the Eternal Spirit.' The touch of Truth, of Reality, had transmuted the man from the idea that he is a mere cage of bones and flesh to the realization that he is the immutable Spirit.

In religious vocabulary, therefore, truth gets an added meaning. It means the final Reality, Ultimate Existence, the Absolute Truth. The Upanishads describe this indescribable thus: 'Brahman is Truth, Knowledge and Infinity'<sup>3</sup>. That is the only Reality, by whichever name it may be called, others are only appearances.

The Upanishads declare that as the clay alone is the true substance of the different types of vessels and things prepared out of it, so also this Reality is alone the true entity of this world. If we know the Reality we know all. Again they say its secret name is '*satyasya satyam*, Truth of truth' i.e. if we take these worldly things as true it is because that Reality



which is true is behind them. 'The vital force is truth, and It is the truth of that,' says the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*. Further they impress upon us the eternality of this Truth compared to the relative world by their statement '*Nityo-nityanam*, The Eternal of the eternal' or as some interpreters like to put it as 'the Eternal of the evanescent'.

From the all-illuminating Supreme, by His resolve, the right and the true were generated.<sup>4</sup> Because of Truth the wind blows. Because of Truth the sun shines in the firmament. Truth is the foundation of speech. Everything rests in Truth,<sup>5</sup> says the *Upanishad*.

Truth seems to be the first casualty in this so-called age of culture. But even those engaged in worldly activities such as office work or business should hold to truth, says Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly. One should not swerve from truth.<sup>6</sup> 'A person of truthfulness alone succeeds and not a man of falsehood, this is the common experience in the world but even the path of the devas widens before truth.'<sup>7</sup> The meaning is that even those that are desirous of going to heaven must adhere to truth. Now about the final liberation, realization of the Ultimate Reality, the *Mundakopanishad* says: 'This Atman is to be reached by truth, austerity, true knowledge and continuous practice of chastity.'<sup>8</sup> As in the outer life so too in the inner life, the life of the soul, truth plays a vital role.

On one occasion recounting his experiences Sri Ramakrishna said: 'After my vision of the Divine Mother I prayed to her, taking a flower in my hands: "Mother here is Thy knowledge and here is Thy ignorance. Take them both, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy holiness and here is Thy unholiness. Take them both, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy good and here is Thy evil. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy righteousness and here is Thy unrighteousness. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love." I mentioned all these, but I could not say: "Mother, here is Thy Truth and here is Thy falsehood. Take them both." I gave up everything at her feet but could not bring my-self to give up truth.' If this is the state of a God-man how much more should not the aspirant who is still to go a long way be guarded against untruth? Again Sri Ramakrishna said: 'It is said that truthfulness alone constitutes the spiritual discipline of the Kali Yuga. If a man clings tenaciously to truth he ultimately realizes God. Without this regard for truth, one gradually loses everything.' That is the invulnerable position truth occupies in life.

This Reality, this Truth, God, is to be realized. First we must have the intellectual conviction that all these things that we perceive, being evanescent, are of little value. They are appearances projected on the Reality by our own ignorance. What is this ignorance? Ignorance is identifying ourselves with everything that is not our true Self, such as the body, senses and mind. In simple language, this I and mine is at the root of all ignorance. The ego stands as a barrier to knowing our true self. The two methods of doing away with this ignorance is either to expand the ego to be all-inclusive, all-pervasive or to annihilate it altogether. Considering every creature that lives and moves as one's own and extending sympathy to them all without distinction whatsoever, with the attitude that everyone is mine since they are my Lord's creatures is the first method.

The other method is: all this is material, had a beginning and has an end but the Reality that I am, is immutable, indestructible so I shall place no value on these. Even the body is a limitation so I must transcend the body.

One is the path of bhakti, the other of knowledge, the position of each of the paths is quite tenable and equally helpful, for both are founded on truth. As long as we have the consciousness that we are the body we cannot deny the world. If we hold one as true, the



truth of the other also must be conceded. So instead of confining ourselves to our little bodies, to our small circle of relations and to our limited possessions if we widen out our horizon and embrace all the world in our arms of love we reach the same goal as one who denies the world attains. This is the easier path. We have not to tear ourselves forcibly from anything. We have only to sublimate our love. Give our love to God and love every creature in and through God.

Others take the Ultimate Reality and deny everything else. They say this world is a mere superimposition like a serpent superimposed on a piece of rope. The rope alone is real and not the snake but due to darkness we are perceiving it as snake. In our everyday experience too we often mistake one thing for another. The Sankhyas posit the reasons for this thus: ‘Non-perception may be due to the extreme distance, immediate proximity, injury to the organs, unsteadiness of the mind, subtlety, obstruction, suppression and blending with what is similar’<sup>9</sup>. What is said here in the case of non-perception holds good in respect of mis-conception also: A bird flying at a distance is not visible. The collyrium on the eye-lids is not perceptible. A blind man cannot see. A wavering mind cannot grasp things properly. An obstruction like a wall intercepts our vision. We cannot distinguish one particular bean among a heap of beans. Likewise in our perceptions we mistake one object for another or do not see them at all.

One day when Sri Ramakrishna was speaking with the devotees he alluded to the topic of God’s nearness and said though God is very near to us, we cannot see him because of the veiling power of Maya. And to illustrate what he said, he suddenly held up a piece of cloth between himself and the audience. ‘You cannot see me now though I am so near. So maya too covers God.’ On another occasion he gave the instance of a tank covered with scum. Let us quote his own words: ‘Once, when I was explaining God’s actions to someone, God suddenly showed me the lake at Kamarpukur. I saw a man removing the green scum and drinking the water. The water was clear as crystal. God revealed to me that Satchidananda is covered by the scum of maya. He who puts the green scum aside can drink the water.’ So though Reality is nearest to us we do not perceive it because of the many veils with which we cover it, the veils of relations, name, form and the like. And to it we also add the veil of untruth and make vision of God an impossibility. Our endeavour, therefore, should be to cut through these veils by the sword of truth. To give up what is unreal and hold fast to the real.

In conclusion: we have seen how truth plays a great part not only in the exclusively spiritual life but also in the worldly activities. It is both the path and the Goal. The highest goal of mankind. This Ultimate Reality being the highest truth the sooner we comprehend it the better can we account for our life here and in the lives to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Katha Up. 1.1.27-28.

<sup>2</sup> Vairagyasatakam, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Taitti. Up. 2-1-1.

<sup>4</sup> Mahanaraya. Up. 1-63.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 79-2.

<sup>6</sup> Taitt. Up. 1-11-1.

<sup>7</sup> Mund. Up. 1-1-6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 3-1-5.

<sup>9</sup> Sankhya Karika 7.



**By Swami Paratparananda**

\* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – July 1962; Vol. 49; page 122

This world is a conglomeration of good and evil, the magnanimous and the diabolic. In each one of us these elements are present in a lesser or more degree. Man's effort is to eliminate the diabolic, the degrading and weakening elements by cultivating the opposite virtues: magnanimity, tolerance, sympathy, love, strength and the like. He has to manifest these divine qualities in full and then only does he reach his pristine perfection. And to reach this perfection, is the goal of all life. 'Everything that exists is moving towards the manifestation of that perfection whether it is conscious of that or not,' says Swami Vivekananda. It is one thing to move unknowingly or drift along the current and quite another to consciously seek to reach perfection. The former may take aeons before the goal is reached whereas the latter may find it in this very life. All Scriptures are but directions to reach this perfection, this freedom. But Scriptures alone by themselves do not help man attain this perfection unless aided and supported by individual effort. The Hindu Scriptures are bold and unequivocally explicit on this point. They declare: 'This Atman is not to be attained by ratiocinations, not by intellect, nay not even by the knowledge of an infinite number of Srutis (Scriptures).'<sup>1</sup> They do not mince matters.

Scriptures lay down only principles and precepts which we have to follow to attain that perfection. Man understands these principles when he has examples before him. Majority of us are not so constituted as to understand the abstract principles without the help of illustrations. 'Would to God that all of us were so developed that we would not require any example, would not require any persons. But that we are not,' says Swami Vivekananda. So we need examples to explain the abstract principles enunciated in the Shastras. The lives of sages and saints supply this want. Hence arises the necessity to study these lives, that we can learn the ways and means to shed our encrustations and *upadhis* — beginning from the ego to the body — that bind us down to the world.

We have heard it said that he who has obtained the grace of a preceptor alone can know Brahman. He alone can realize God. We have also heard it said that one should approach such a Guru with humility, and learn of him by obeisance, by questioning and by service.<sup>2</sup> But in an age when valuation of things higher seems to have undergone a great change and when scepticism stalks the earth, these things are rarely believed, unless there are dazzling examples which can pierce through the veils and reach the heart of man.

Our land has been fortunate to bear on its bosom personages of such spiritual magnitude, as the occasions demanded, as could scatter the gathering clouds of agnosticism and unbelief by blasts of their wonderful realizations. So we find Sri Ramakrishna come to re-establish the eternal spiritual values at a time when religion was considered as mere superstition. He gathered round him the very lads who were most sceptic, but sincere, from the city of Calcutta to propagate his message, transformed them and commanded them to be like lamps unto the weary travellers on this parched earth. Some he commanded with vehemence to go forth and bring the erring humanity to its senses and gather into the fold the sheep that have strayed away.

Among these University students was Sashi Bhusan Chakravarti, young, strong, energetic, with a brilliant intellect. In spite of all these qualities or because of them there was



an undercurrent of unrest in him, which goaded him on to seek spiritual solace first in the Brahmo Samaj and later at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna. That he was a sceptic at the time he met Sri Ramakrishna is amply borne out by his reply to the Master's question, whether he believed in God with form or in a formless God. He had replied, 'When I am not certain of the very existence of God how can I say one way or the other.' This feeling however did not last long. His first contact with the Master revealed to him, as it were, quite different regions, where everything was soothing to the senses and bestowing serenity on the mind. He hungered for it more and more. His visits to the Master became frequent. Many a day he would come to Sri Ramakrishna full of doubts but the Master solved them all without it being necessary for him to ask about them. Then developed an intimacy, a relationship which bound Sashi forever with the Master. Sashi began to regard Sri Ramakrishna's words as divine injunctions and faithfully followed them to the letter. It is said that once coming to know of the excellence of Sufi Poetry he started studying Persian. He took to its study so seriously that even when he went to Dakshineswar he used to carry those books with him. One day he was so absorbed in their study that he did not hear Sri Ramakrishna call until the Master had called him thrice. When, however, the Master observed, 'If you forget your duties for the sake of secular studies, you will lose your devotion,' he made a bundle of those books and threw them into the Ganges. Books lost all importance for him from then onwards.

After Sashi's two years of communion in the bliss that flowed incessantly at Dakshineswar, came the unforeseen blow in the form of the Master's fatal illness. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that this illness of his was the Divine Mother's device for separating the inner circle of devotees from the rest. Among those who served the Master at this time with untiring zeal, Sashi stood first. For Sashi, the Master was his all in all. He could not brook the idea that the Master would leave his mortal coil so soon. But all indications were against this presumption. Yet night and day he remained like a shadow at the Master's bedside and nursed him. Personal service to the Guru formed his main spiritual practice at this time and this remained the dominant note of his life throughout the rest of his days. To serve the Master whole-heartedly became a passion with him. The chroniclers of Sri Ramakrishna referring to Sashi's service, write: 'He practised no other spiritual discipline. He knew no other asceticism. Regardless of personal comfort, of food or rest, he was indefatigably at work. His one idea was to alleviate the sufferings of the Master. He would have given up his life if he had thought that would cure him. He had attained perfection through service; so of what use were other forms of disciplines for him? Everyone marvelled at his indefatigable energy, his sustained power of endurance and his boundless love for the Master.'

For eight months or more Sashi knew no rest or comfort in serving the Master. But setting at naught all hopes and wishes of the devotees, the best medical advice, treatment, and nursing, the day of final departure of the Master arrived. Sri Ramakrishna was more cheerful that day than ever and the devotees believed that he was really getting better, so that, when the end actually came Sashi could not believe it. He remonstrated with the Doctor for declaring that life was extinct. He thought it was just another samadhi of the Master and requested the assembled devotees to chant the Lord's name. They chanted Lord Hari's name for a long time. But when at last, life did not return and the body grew cold they carried it to the burning ghat. The anguish Sashi felt at the departure of his beloved Master can only be imagined than described. He fell at the feet of the Master unconscious. However, after reviving he sang the name of the Master in triumphant praise. When the cremation was over he gathered the relics that remained and carried them on his head to the Cossipore garden.

Sashi's service to the Master did not stop with the disappearance of the Master's corporeal frame. We find him engaged in the Master's service again at the Baranagore Math, whither they had moved after the expiry of the lease of the Cossipore Garden. Here Sashi Maharaj set apart a separate room for the preservation of the Master's relics. Placing a portrait



of the Master on a pedestal in that room he commenced worshipping the Master in the orthodox way. His devotion and worship thoroughly moved and left a deep impression on the visitors.

Towards the end of December 1886 the young disciples who had renounced the world, formally took the vow of sannyasa and assumed new names. Narendra, into whose care the Master had left the disciples, wanted to have the name 'Swami Ramakrishnananda' for himself. But having seen the unbounded love Sashi bore towards the Master and the inimitable way in which he served him, Narendra relinquished the covetable name in favour of the brother disciple. And true to his name Sashi Maharaj found bliss in the service of the Master and the dissemination of his message till the end of his life to the exclusion of all his personal needs.

The early days in the monastery were of extreme privation. The contributions which some of the lay disciples of the Master made were inadequate for the expenses of the brotherhood. Sometimes they would go by turns and beg, but the food thus secured was not even sufficient for the day. Swami Ramakrishnananda at that time worked as a teacher for three months in a nearby High School to maintain the monastery and the service of the Master. When others lost themselves in meditation it was Swami Ramakrishnananda who after offering the food to Sri Ramakrishna would wait with their meals or even drag them out of their meditation. Thus he kept watch on the relics of the Master and looked after the children of the Master like a mother.

He believed that the Master was present in the shrine and therefore never felt the necessity to go on pilgrimages. The sanctity of all the places of pilgrimage was experienced by him in the shrine. When all the other brother disciples in response to the call of the itinerant life left the monastery one by one Swami Ramakrishnananda stuck to his post of watching over the sacred relics of the Master. He never even went to Calcutta to see Suresh Mitra, a devotee of the Master, who was on his death-bed. But at the earnest insistence of the latter he went in a carriage hired for the return journey, spent an hour with the devotee and returned to the monastery.

To Swami Ramakrishnananda the likeness of the Master ceased to be a likeness. He treated the portrait as if it was the Master himself in flesh and blood. On a sultry night at the Alambazar monastery — to which place the monastery was shifted from Baranagore — when he was fanning himself he suddenly got up and as he felt that the Master should also be feeling the burning heat, entered the shrine and standing near the cot of the Master fanned him till dawn. Such incidents were not infrequent in his life.

After 11 years of constant watch over the Master's relics, he was called upon, by Swami Vivekananda, to go to Madras and found a monastery there in the name of the Master and spread his message. Swami Ramakrishnananda readily agreed to the leader's call recognising behind it the guiding hand of the Master; for did not Sri Ramakrishna entrust the responsibility of all of them to Swami Vivekananda? Did not the Master make him their leader? He took the next steamer to Madras and arrived there at the end of March 1897 with a framed photo of Sri Ramakrishna.

As at Baranagore and Alambazar here too in Madras he established a shrine and performed daily worship of the Master. All the activities of the Math centred round Sri Ramakrishna. But here too it was a continuation of those days of travail. The stir and enthusiasm that was created by Swami Vivekananda's triumphant tour in the West had died down with the receptions given to him in Madras and other places. When therefore Swami Ramakrishnananda started a monastery first on the Ice House Road and later at the Ice House and subsequently at Mylapore he had to be sometimes the poojari, cook, servant and all, on account of paucity of funds. He had to take classes in different parts of the City. At times when he returned in the evening he would be too tired to cook. On such occasions he would



satisfy his hunger by a piece of bread. Yet except a few of his students, who knew about his difficulties and volunteered to remove them, none cared to know. He was very reticent to receive the help proffered by those young men lest it should cause them inconvenience. For their own condition was far from affluent.

These privations, however, stood not in his way of maintaining the worship of the Master in all its detail. Such were the difficult days that he passed through, that sometimes there would be nothing to offer to the Master and the Swami in great distress would go to the shrine and pour out his anguish. One day when the Swami was in the Shrine some visitors arrived and they heard the Swami call out in loud and angry tones, 'You have brought me here, Old Man, and left me helpless! Are you testing my powers of patience and endurance? I will not go and beg hereafter for my sake or even for yours. If anything comes unasked I will offer it to you and share the *prasadam*. If not, I will bring the sea-sand for offering to you and I shall live upon that.'

As in the Alambazar Monastery in Madras too he would on sultry days fan the Master's portrait for hours on end both in the afternoons and nights. As days passed his conviction that the Master was himself present in his likeness grew stronger and stronger. His worship therefore attained the classic character of service to a beloved person. Whenever he himself felt the oppressive heat he would immediately remember about the Master, open the shrine and would start fanning him. Besides, as Sister Devamata has stated 'He was dead to himself and alive only in the Master.' Writing about the Swami she further adds: 'His coming and going, his eating and sleeping, his labour and teaching, his entire living took their rise in the will of the Master, never in his own desire and convenience.

Those who saw him carry his Master's picture close to his heart, his body bent over it in protection as he walked in rain from the carriage to the entrance to the new Math hall at Mylapore (Madras), when he moved the shrine there from the Ice House, could appreciate the tenderness of love, the power of devotion for his Guru which transfused his being. He could say of his Master as truly as St. Paul said of his: "The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith in the Son of God."

An incident that happened at the Mylapore Math is reminiscent of this faith of the Swami. The first building of the Math at Mylapore had developed cracks in several places and during rains water would come down through these fissures. Swami Ramakrishnananda at such times would enter the shrine to see whether water leaked through the roof. One night he found that water dripped just over the likeness of the Master. He stood there holding an umbrella over the Master till the night wore out and the rains stopped. He did not move the portrait of the Master to a safer side as that would mean disturbing the Master's sleep at an unusual hour.

Swami Ramakrishnananda's life was one of great austerity and self-surrender. His complete dependence on the Master was observed on more than one occasion. On the death of Mr. Biligiri Iyengar the original owner, the Ice House, in which the Math was housed, came up for auction. The devotees apprehensive of the outcome if the house passed into a stranger's hands were sorely perturbed and one of them reported the progress of the auction to the Swami every now and then. But the Swami, who was seated at some distance from the crowd that had gathered, remained calm and serene and after a time remarked to the devotee: 'My wants are few, what do we care who buys or sells? I need only a small room for Sri Guru Maharaj. I can stay anywhere and spend my time in speaking about him.'

Another time Swami Ramakrishnananda had been to Puri to escort Swami Brahmananda to Madras. Through some misunderstanding no berth was reserved for him in the train. After much difficulty an upper berth was made available. For a person of the Swami's build to occupy a weakly built upper berth meant no small danger to the occupants below. This, therefore, brought forth some caustic comments from the passengers. One of the



friends who had come to see the Swami off expressed his embarrassment at the situation. The Swami's smiling and calm reply to him was, 'Do not mind. The Divine Mother will take care of me.' And strange to say the train had to be abandoned as the engine had derailed; a separate train left for Madras from another track and in it the Swami was provided with a single first class compartment by the station master. As the Swami boarded the train he said to Devamata with the same confident smile, 'I told you, sister, that the Divine Mother would look after me.'

On another occasion wide publicity was given that on the next day, the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna, there would be a grand feeding of the poor but there was not a single bag of rice in the Math. When some devotee asked the Swami how he was going to feed the poor, his quiet rebuke in a compassionate tone was: 'You are a fool. Have you no faith in Annapurna Devi? She will take care of Her children. Throw the whole burden on Her and be free from all anxieties.' As they were talking thus, carts laden with rice and provisions in sufficient supply rolled into the Math compound. The statement of Sri Krishna in the Gita, 'I take upon Myself the welfare of those who have completely surrendered themselves to Me,' was thus seen here verified in toto.

His was a life of tremendous activity. He sometimes took as many as eleven classes a week in Madras. He went on invitation to lecture to many places in South India, Bombay and even far off Burma. Though he was in the midst of such intense activity he remained unattached, and alone though surrounded by men. Like the deep waters of the ocean his inner being remained unmoved by the ripples of activities and disturbances on the surface. Once he was heard to remark, 'I am full of God. What need have I of any one else?' He analysed, 'Aloneness means singleness, purity. In reality fearlessness exists where there is only one. Since we cannot be happy as long as we fear, we shall not find peace until we can say I am alone, I need nothing.'

The Bhagavad Gita and *Vishnusahasranama* were very dear to his heart. Every morning before he would begin his work he would chant them without fail. His observations on the efficacy of the chanting of the Gita demand special attention in this age when the sceptic moderns and cynics deprecate and doubt the value of such chanting — when done without understanding its meaning. He said, 'Let urgent business remain or not, I have learnt that the reading of the Gita is the most meritorious and glorious of all actions. How can he who has enjoyed and understood for a time at least the cardinal truths of the Gita be attracted by the paltry things of the world? Really to enjoy the sweetness of the Gita one should possess the force of Bhakti and the unstinted devotion of a pure heart. Nevertheless even the mere repetition of the Holy words that fell from the lips of Bhagavan Sri Krishna cannot be without efficacy. It will surely arouse in the reader an unfailing sense of purity and devotion.' Will the worldly-wise take this advice and give it a fair trial before condemning such practices?

Living with a God-man Swami Ramakrishnananda had learnt to respect the prophets of all religions and sects. He considered it blasphemy to speak ill of them. He could not even tolerate any one speaking disparagingly of them within his hearing. His reprimands on such occasions were severe irrespective of the person to whom they were meant. Once he left a place where he was invited to discuss religious topics, because someone spoke irreverently of Sri Sankara, saying that he had no place where the Acharya was not respected. A rich devotee another day spoke slightly of Sankara in his presence. The Swami came down upon him with a homethrust which silenced the speaker. The assembled devotees later expressed their fear that the gentleman might stop his contribution to the Math. But the Swami did not care about it. The gentleman on the other hand understood his fault and corrected himself. Another time it was a youth who happened to pass uncharitable remarks about the *Chaitanya Charitarmrita*, that fell into his wrath. Thus by precept and example he has taught that every



religious teacher is great and deserves all our homage and reverence.

His was a life of self-abandonment. To him selfishness meant debasing, demoralising, and degrading oneself. To him assertion of the ego meant atrociousness. He said: 'When God asserts himself in man he becomes good, pure and virtuous. Try to feel God inside yourself and you will overcome all selfishness. All your anxieties and worries come from selfishness. Let go your little self and they will disappear.' Further he added, 'So long as we are selfish, our work is bound to be fruitless. We may deliver fine lectures, we may gain name and fame but the actual results will be nil.' He asked, 'How can we be unfeeling? If we cannot love others, if we cannot serve others, what are we here for?' And out of this expansive heart arose the conception of the Students' Home when he met some boys orphaned by the epidemic of plague at Coimbatore. The Swami took them under his care and thus was formed the nucleus of the Students' Home of Madras which today is providing succour to hundreds of poor boys yearly.

He was the pioneer of the Ramakrishna Movement first in Calcutta and later in the South. It was he who held the fort, as it were, when all others went away for tapasya or on pilgrimage. It was he who managed the affairs of the monastery for the first eleven years during its most crucial days. Beset though he was with the problems usually encountered by a pioneer of a new movement he faced them all bravely and solved them. And for all this his only asset was his devotion to the Master and calm resignation to his will. To quote Swami Premananda, one of the direct disciples of the Master: 'In fact, Swami Ramakrishnananda, and none of us, is the founder of the Math and its shrine. He stuck to the shrine in spite of the protests of his brother disciples.' And this worship has now been helping myriads of people to strengthen their faith in external worship and grow in spirituality both in this country as well as outside it.

He travelled widely lecturing and spreading the message of Vedanta as lived by the Master all over the South, and this message was well received, particularly in Bangalore, Mysore and Travancore. A monastery was established in Bangalore on a firm basis before long by his untiring efforts. But it is not meet to judge the achievements of the great ones by the immediate results, for the seeds they sow never prove barren but abide their time and when suitable atmosphere and environment are created they germinate and yield plentiful results. The country today is reaping a rich harvest the seeds of which were sown by him in the first decade of this century.

He was a great writer both in Bengali and English. His book on the life of Ramanuja in Bengali is considered a classic and gave to the North the details of the life of the Acharya till then little known. He contributed many articles to the *Udbodhan*, the Bengali journal of the Order. The book, *Universe and Man*, a collection of his discourses became the first publication of the Madras Math and received great appreciation from the then Yuvaraja of Mysore. Later some more of his discourses came in book form. We thus find him a scholar, a writer and a lecturer of no small repute. More than all this his life was an illustration of his teaching.

It was an education to be with Swami Ramakrishnananda. He was a strict disciplinarian having himself lived a life of austerity. But all his chastisements were for moulding the lives of the novitiates and not merely authoritarian. He loved these young men and liked to see them grow in spirituality. With their welfare at heart how could he keep aloof when they went wrong? The young monks though at first were cut to the quick soon came to know of the Swami's love for them and took the rebukes in the proper spirit. A young monk whom the Swami loved dearly, once went to see his parents and came back laden with presents of clothes and a silk wrapper. Swami Ramakrishnananda noticed this, called him and asked as to whom the silk wrapper was meant. The young Swami in fear replied that it was for Swami Ramakrishnananda. The Swami took the wrapper and asked the junior monk to throw away



all the clothes. When he had done so he said, 'For the safety of monastic life all memories of home are to be wiped off. Unless this is done how can a monk look upon every home as his own and the whole humanity as his family?'

He would not allow the rigid rules of his monastic life to be violated by any one. Once when he was away from the city Sister Devamata, who had earned a soft corner in his heart by her devoted disposition, finding his room untidy, swept it, put his bedding in the sun and neatly arranged the things. The Swami noticed it after his return, resented her action and did not fail to say that she was wrong in touching the bed of a monk and warned her against repeating such acts.

We have stated above of his love for the brother disciples during the Baranagore and Alambazar days. The flow of this love continued throughout his life. Swami Brahmananda, the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna was not only loved but respected as the representative of the Master by him. When the former visited Madras he said to the devotees: 'You have not seen the Master but it is as good as seeing him if you see the son.' That this was his firm faith was seen when a devotee who brought some fruits for Sri Ramakrishna was asked to offer them to Swami Brahmananda.

His respect and reverence for the Holy Mother was equal to that which he had towards the Master. One of his great ambitions in life was to bring the Holy Mother to South India. When therefore she came he accompanied her in her tour, looked meticulously after all her conveniences and when after her sojourn she left for the North, Swami Ramakrishnananda said, 'My life's ambition is fulfilled.' He did not live long after this. Soon the excessive work which had been telling upon his health and the enervating climate of the South and the privations he had to undergo threw him a prey to the fell disease, pthisis. Doctors advised immediate change, the devotees entreated him to go to the North, but until he received orders from Swami Brahmananda he did not move from his place of duty. The disease however proved fatal and he passed away on August 21, 1911.

Such was the life of Swami Ramakrishnananda: a blazing fire of renunciation, an example of Guru bhakti and Guru seva, a teacher of great magnitude, an illustration of obedience and awareness of duty, and above all a heart soft like butter which melted at others' sufferings. Though it is more than half a century now after he has passed away, still his life sheds that lustre which clouds cannot hinder, nor darkness obstruct but guides all those who travel on the path of salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Katho Up. 1-2-23.

<sup>2</sup> Gita IV-34.



**Swami Paratparananda**

\* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – AUG 1962; Vol. 49; page 162

The idea of austerity, in an age of plentiful amenities and luxuries, is something which seems to the average man as ludicrous. He thinks of them, that abstain, as pitiable creatures. Why should not one enjoy the luxuries bountifully provided by nature or circumstances? That seems to be his question. Possibly, he thinks of them as pessimistic fools. For, who else but a fool fails to avail of an opportunity of leading an easy life? seems to be his contention. Of yore, there were the injunctions of the Sastras, which man respected, to hold him back from going headlong over the precipice of excessive indulgence. But, for some centuries now, that hold has gradually slackened and is mostly lost. Man now treats the teachings of the scriptures as the devices of the priests to cheat him of his valid rights. He, therefore, treats them with scant respect. He thinks that, so long as he abides by the law of the land, he is at perfect liberty to do as he pleases. In such a context why should he abstain? Why should he restrain? That is his idea.

Let us now see, how far this attitude of the commoner is justified. Man is not a machine that he can go on indefinitely in this manner. Even machines have their longevity curtailed, if worked incessantly and without respite. That, machines worked moderately give longer and better service is an experience within the purview of one and all. Similarly, every thinking man will concede that, this human machine also can work better and serve fruitfully, if it is not pressed into any and every kind of service. So moderation and regulation are necessary even for the person, whose idea of himself is not more than a body, and whose happiness lies in the enjoyment of the senses.

As in secular life, the body and the mind are to be carefully handled, so too in spiritual life they are to be deftly processed. There are several processes through which they have to be passed through. One such process is *tapas*. The meaning of the word *tap* in Sanskrit is, to heat. Most of us are familiar with the smelting of ores. The ores are thrown into a furnace where the heat sometimes reaches 2000°C or more. This heat melts the ore, burns away the dross, and the pure metal is let out. Man's mind is also like the ore. It has gathered, in its passage through innumerable lives, encrustations in the form of propensities. And these propensities, like the impurities of the ore, have so mingled and fused into the mind, that their separation is a more formidable task than the extraction of the metal from the ore. The process of separation is also a more prolonged and complicated one. But until we have done it, we cannot see God, cannot know the Reality: the one aim of all spiritual life.

We must remember here, that no earthly heat can be applied to the mind as it is subtle. We have to find a subtle heat. What then is this subtle heat? It is the dwelling of the mind in the thought of God. The word *tapas*, in the sense of heat, is used here in a metaphorical sense and by usage it has come to mean right-thinking or meditation. Continuous dwelling on good thoughts helps, like fire, to burn out the dross of the mind. Mark the word 'continuous' here. Each one of us does think good thoughts sometime or other, for a



shorter or longer duration, but that does not help us much to attain the covetable goal: God realization. As long as the good thoughts last, we feel an elevation of the mind and we are apt to think we have achieved our end. Soon bad thoughts lure the mind away, after which depression sets in as a reaction. Therefore, a continuous flow of the thought-current in the direction of things higher is absolutely essential to purify the mind, just as a continuous fire is necessary to smelt the ores.

### ***Body and Mind Inter-related***

Now the question may arise, if *tapas* means meditation, thinking of good thoughts, then where is the necessity of bodily restraint? To this we ask, does the body act without the collusion or connivance of the mind? No. On the other hand, human experience has been and is, that the mind acts on the body before the body functions. For instance, if a procession, accompanied with music, were to pass by your house and if at that time you were deeply poring over some interesting book would you hear the noise? No. Why not? Though your ears had heard and conveyed the message duly to the mind, the mind had shut itself off to the hearing. It, consequently, follows that the body by itself is powerless to do any action. Conversely viewed, every bodily action is done under the tacit consent or with the actual co-operation of the mind. The bodily features change with the change in the mind. Again the desires of the body in the majority of us, make the mind subservient to the body. Bodily needs or passions move the mind. Thus we find a close and inseparable relation between the two.

This relation is not a chance occurrence, not existing in the past, nor that will not be in the future. Our very physical features are representatives of the mind. We have read, how Sri Ramakrishna used to test his disciples before accepting them. He would look at their physical features, and if he was satisfied he would further test them by taking their palms into his hands. He would move the palm of the disciple up and down, as if he was feeling its weight. And if he felt it light he would accept him. When he visited Devendranath Tagore he asked the latter to bare his chest, so that he could see how far he was advanced in spiritual life. Further, we read how strongly opposed the Master was to an aspirant's sitting with the chin on the palm of his hand. He said that it indicated a mental depression, a pensive mood. Swami Ramakrishnananda too used to upbraid his students if he found them shaking their legs when seated on a chair or bench as it showed the restlessness of the mind.

Again, take the evidence of the Sastras. *Svetasvataropanisad* exhorts how one should sit for meditation: 'Keeping the three limbs of the body (viz. the trunk, the neck and the head) erect, merging all the senses into the mind, a wise one should by the boat of Sabda Brahman (*pranava*) cross the terrible currents of *samsara*, of birth and death.'<sup>2</sup> All these conclusively prove what close affinity lies between the body and the mind.

### ***Modes of Tapas***

It is a matter of common knowledge and experience that the mind can concentrate on an external object more readily than on something abstruse. The concrete, it finds, more easy to grasp than the abstract. Swami Vivekananda, by means of a story, illustrates how the subtle *prana* can be grasped by regulating breathing, a comparatively gross function of the body: 'There was once a minister to a great king. He fell into disgrace. The king, as a



punishment, confined him to a very high tower and left him to perish there. He had a faithful wife, who came to the tower at night and called to her husband at the top to know what she could do to help him. He told her to return to the tower the following night, and bring with her a long rope, some stout twine, pack thread, silken thread, a beetle, and a little honey. Wondering much, the good wife obeyed her husband, and brought him the desired articles. The husband directed her to attach the silken thread firmly to the beetle, then to smear its horns with a drop of honey, and set it free on the wall of the tower, with its head pointing upwards. She obeyed all these instructions, and the beetle started on its long journey. Smelling the honey ahead it slowly crept onwards, in the hope of reaching the honey, until at last it reached the top of the tower, when the minister grasped the beetle, and got possession of the silken thread. He told his wife to tie the other end to the pack thread, and after he had drawn up the pack thread he repeated the process with the stout twine, and lastly with the rope. Then the rest was easy. The minister descended from the tower by means of the rope, and made his escape. In this body of ours the breath motion is the “silken thread”; by laying hold of and learning to control it we grasp the pack thread of the nerve currents, and from these the stout twine of our thoughts and lastly the rope of *prana*, controlling which we reach freedom.’<sup>3</sup> Similarly have we, who desire liberation, to control simultaneously the body and the mind.

Our ancient sages thought deeply over this, experimented, and then gave out what they thought beneficial to posterity. Though in the Upanisads we hear quite often about *tapas*, a little clear definition of it we get only in the *Sandilyopanisad* which says: ‘Tapas is the drying up of the body by the observance of the injunctions of the Vedas — vows like *Krcchra* and *Candrayana*.’<sup>4</sup> One reason why the Upanisads do not define *tapas* more elaborately may be that, the preceptors were there to guide the aspirants. However, Sri Krishna in the Gita removes this ambiguity with a detailed analysis of the subject. Sri Krishna must have observed, in his time, what a parody was made of the concept of *tapas* and, therefore, felt it necessary to describe its meaning at great length. This must have not only disabused *tapas* of its harmful acquired meanings, but also warned the laity against frauds and cheats.

Sri Krishna classifies *tapas*, austerity, under three heads, viz. austerity of the body, speech, and mind. ‘Worship of God, the twice-born, the preceptors, and the wise; purity (internal and external), probity, chastity, non-injury are said to be austerities of the body. Speech which causes no vexation, and is true, agreeable and wholesome; and regular study of the Vedas — these form the austerity of speech. Serenity of mind, kindness, silence, self-control, honesty of motive, these constitute austerity of the mind.’<sup>5</sup> Sankara commenting on these verses says, ‘Speech should be endowed with all the four qualities mentioned here. Absence of even one does not form the austerity of speech. Silence, means not absence of speech alone but also speech controlled by mind.’ Sri Krishna further says, ‘All these austerities undergone with the utmost *sraddha*, without any desire for enjoyment of the results, and by persons of controlled nature alone are called austerities born out of *sattva* material.’<sup>6</sup>

How painstakingly did not Sri Ramakrishna watch over his young disciples? He took care to see what and how much they ate. What company they kept and on what subjects they talked. Last but not least he insisted on their meditating, regularly. Whosoever spent the nights with him would be awakened in the early hours of the morning and would be asked to meditate. He stressed on continence and warned against the lure of lucre. Lust and lucre he said were the two main hurdles in the path of God-realization.



### *Importance and Value of Tapas*

*Tapas* has been extolled even in the Rig Veda, the most ancient of all religious literature extant now. The Upanisads and the sages have given an eminent place for it in spiritual life. 'Seek to know Brahman by means of *tapas*, for *tapas* is (the means of knowing) Brahman,'<sup>7</sup> says *Taittiriya Upanisad* repeatedly. As discipline it occupies a place of its own, declares the same Upanisad in another place: '*tapas*, learning and teaching (the Vedas)'.<sup>8</sup> The Upanisad at the end of the same chapter says, 'Learning and teaching alone are to be practised for they alone are *tapas*.'<sup>9</sup> The first word in our great epic, Ramayana, of sage Valmiki, is *tapas*.<sup>10</sup>

Every ancient sage required of his pupils, when they approached him for instruction, to live under him a life of *tapas* for some time — the duration depending on the progress in study and spiritual life, already made by the students. Sage Pippalada in *Prasnopanishad* said to the six pupils who approached him, 'Live again for a year a life of *tapas*, *brahmacarya* and *sraddha* and then ask about your doubts.'<sup>11</sup> In the *Chandogya Upanishad* Brahma asks Indra to live a life of *brahmacarya* for a hundred and one years, before he finds him fit to receive *Brahma Vidya*. It has been conceded by all sages that, purification of the mind is the only way paving to the descent of God's grace or for receiving His untarnished reflection, gaining which man becomes liberated, becomes immortal. And *tapas* helps a great deal towards this. It inevitably constitutes the corner stone of spiritual life. That is why the entire religious literature of the world, especially of our motherland, has enshrined *tapas* in a prominent manner.

How do the observance of austerities help one to liberation? Have we to take this on the authority of the Scriptures alone or can they be logically proved? These questions will surely trouble the moderns. Before trying to satisfy these doubts we shall also place before them some questions. Do they question their professor when they are asked to experiment in a certain way? What is their authority for their conviction? Were they logically convinced? It was written in some books that a certain scientist worked out a problem and noted down his findings. And any one else who tries, will also achieve similar results. So, here, something was taken for granted in the beginning, it was only a hypothesis for the experimenter until he reached the end of his research. Similarly our ancient sages too have given us their findings and we have to test them before decrying them as superstition; that is the scientific way of viewing things. If we fail to face the hardships therein involved, it means we are not sincere, it shows our dilettante attitude as well as cowardliness, and all decrying is to cover our inability under the cloak of reasoning.

Now, let us take the scientist's own views. He says that the beings undergo change or metamorphosis to suit the environments. This is the theory of evolution that he presents. Now, as it is in the outside world so it is with each organism. But he says that this process is very slow. He believes that the process can be expedited under certain circumstances. That is exactly what our sages also say. They say that the *Atman* (Soul) is pure bliss, pure knowledge and absolute existence. All that lives must experience this. All that exists must go back to God from where it originated. All this suffering here is only an evolution towards, a return to, God. Our sages were interested in man's attaining this primeval nature by the expediting process. They said that, this primeval nature which bestows tranquillity on man cannot be attained by having recourse to excitement. They are poles apart. Hence, eschew all excitable things. How to do that? By cultivating the opposite virtues. Now, take



the austerity of the body prescribed in the Gita, viz. worship of God and the like. None of them excite us, at least towards worldly things, if done in the proper spirit. They teach us humility, not in the sense of engendering the spirit of our unworthiness but respect for things higher and nobler. Purity makes man stand up to any vilification and not crouch before a false report. Who would not like to be dealt with in a straightforward manner? Without continence man can never attain God, that is the verdict of all realized souls without exception. Continence is the conservation of energy. An energy, which is more powerful than all the powers on earth, which gives man grit and tenacity to persevere in his spiritual quest. All these austerities tend towards bodily tranquillity. We have also simultaneously to practise the austerities of speech and mind.

Science says every action has a reaction. Our sages do not differ from them on this point. They only ask people to apply this not only in the case of mere scientific experiments but in daily life too. If our speech be harsh, the reaction will not be palatable and that will be bad for the tranquillity of the mind. We need no laboratory to demonstrate to us how perturbed our minds become when we give ourselves up to passions such as anger, jealousy and the like. Serenity of the mind is an essential requisite in our spiritual path, so that is called a part of *tapas*; it is to be cultivated. By all these methods the spiritual aspirant creates an atmosphere, an environment — to quote from the vocabulary of the scientist — wherein the metamorphosis or transmutation of the mind is accelerated until it reaches perfection, purity. The pure mind is then able to grasp the reflection of the Reality, which is the consummation of all spiritual effort. Necessity of *tapas* is therefore not inconsistent with reasoning, on the other hand, that it is the only path, seems to be reasonable.

### ***Misdirected and Fruitless Tapas***

But as it happens in the case of all paths prescribed with all good intentions, the spirit of the injunction is forgotten and people cling to the letter alone, so in the case of *tapas* too, we find, the real purpose was forgotten and all sorts of tortures of the body came to be designated as *tapas*. Stress came to be laid on external purity and bodily suffering. Sometimes they were carried to such extremes as to inveigh against themselves. Once Swami Brahmananda was asked by a disciple as to what austerity was. He said: 'Austerities are of many types. Once I saw a man who took a vow not to sit or lie down for twelve years. When I met him, he had nearly finished his period. Only five or six months remained. Standing continuously for so many years had made his legs grow fat as they do in elephantiasis. While sleeping he held himself up by a rope. Such are not real austerities. Anyone can perform them. The body is easily controlled. But it is another matter to control the mind.' Sri Ramakrishna deprecated show in practising spiritual disciplines. He said: 'One should meditate in the mind, in a corner of the house (meaning a secluded place), and in the forest.' Sri Krishna too says that all *tapas* done without *sraddha* is *asat* (fruitless). It neither brings good here nor in the other world. Here he does not obtain the approbation of the wise and after death they yield no fruit of liberation or union with God. In the same way austerities performed with the intention of doing harm to enemies or gaining supernatural powers are not considered as *tapas* in its right perspective.

### ***Conclusion***



Spiritual life is a life of abstinence from the worldly enjoyments, for the sake of an everlasting felicity. It is, as it were, to cautiously step aside from being caught in the wheel of birth and death. Sri Ramakrishna calls that dexterity, dexterity which enables one to get away from being caught in the net of *Mahamaya*, the great illusive power of the Lord, and not that dexterity which enables one to amass wealth or lead a comfortable life. *Tapas* is a limb of spiritual life. It develops in man clear thinking with regard to the values of life. It guides the boat of our life like the mariner's compass. Yet, we must remember that, it is only the means and not an end in itself, the end being God-realization.

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<sup>1</sup> Gita.VI.13.

<sup>2</sup> Svetasvataropanisad. 2.8.

<sup>3</sup> Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.I,seventh edition, p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> Sandilyopanishad, 1.2.

<sup>5</sup> Gita, XVII. 14,15,16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.,XVII.17.

<sup>7</sup> Taittiriya upanishad, 3.2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1-9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Valmiki Ramayana

<sup>11</sup> Prasna Upanishad, 1.2.



**By Swami Paratparananda**

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The masses of India have been stirred to the very core of their being by two personalities, viz., Sri Ramachandra and Sri Krishna. Indians have been disparagingly termed hero-worshippers and idolators. It is to the credit of the Indians that they have found their ideal and do not hesitate to worship it. Perhaps, it is so for the reason that India has produced more heroes than any other part of the world, heroes whose visions were never blurred as to the verities of life, whose conquests were over the flesh into the empyrean heights of the Everest of spirituality. The citadel they stormed was their own nature and they never relented until the souls door was thrown open to them; until the secret of life was made known to them. And they by their examples and precepts made it known to us as how to bypass this world of unrealities. Why should we not then admire them? Why should we not worship such heroes? And then as regards the so-called idolatry less of it is said the better. For, man if he does not worship an image as a symbol of Divinity, he will worship something else like Mammon or someone else, not with the idea of God but what they stand for. Which is better; to worship the Divine in a symbol or to worship the decayable?

Definitely the former. For, in the perishable there is no fixed ideal, and the conquest of ones own nature is more covetable than the conquest of the external nature. Again is nature a tiny thing that you can know all about it within the span of a few years given to you? Indians, therefore, rightly worship such personages as their ideal as have conquered their own self, own nature. Maybe sometimes the adoration is misplaced, but that quickly dies. Scores of kings have ruled over India in the last few millenniums. But who remembers them all? Who adores them? Even the worthiest of them are not — if at all — remembered more than a few times in the lifetime of a man. Not so Sri Ramachandra or Sri Krishna. They have that eternal charm about them. They eternally attract.

Sri Krishna attracts three types of persons: the believer, the sceptic, and the scholar. To the believers he is their Lord God, capable of protecting them from all calamities or to bestow courage to face boldly all misery. To the sceptic, he is a heroic and symbolic mythical personality, yet with something to impart, something to teach. To the scholar, he is a great philosopher, a great teacher.

His greatest teachings are contained in the Bhagavad Gita, which has been aptly described as the essence of the Upanisads. We need not here enter into the controversy whether the Gita was actually delivered on the battle-field, when both the armies were poised for fight, or not. We shall confine ourselves as to what message we have from the personality which shines forth through its teachings.

We come across in the Vedas and the Upanisads apparently contradictory statements. With these statements as basis several systems of philosophy have been propounded, each holding its own view, to be perfectly in accordance with the trend of the scriptures. When all these schools of thought claim veracity, at the same time and on the ground of the same scripture, the generality of mankind gets bewildered. It knows not which path is correct and what path it should follow.

Arjuna in the battle-field experiences a similar difficulty though slightly of a different nature. His problem was to decide what his duty was. On the one hand was the pledge, as a



warrior, to rid the country of all irreligious and tyrannical elements and establish righteousness, on the other he was faced with the poignant question of killing hosts of his near and dear ones, arrayed and aligned in the enemy camp. What should he do? Confused, and frightened at taking a wrong step, he breaks down completely and refuses to fight. However, he was wise enough to offer himself to be taught and guided by the nobler counsels of his friend and philosopher, Sri Krishna. He says, 'With my natural faculties overcome by (a sense of) helplessness and weakness, and my mind perplexed regarding my duty, I ask you — tell me that which is definitely good for me. I am your disciple; teach me who have taken refuge in you.'<sup>1</sup> Arjuna's despondency thus forms the genesis of the Gita.

Swami Vivekananda in a hymn to Sri Ramakrishna describes succinctly and beautifully the personality of Sri Krishna and the magnificence of his teachings thus: 'He who quelled the uproar, like that of the world's day of dissolution, of the great battle (of Kurukshetra), who dispelled the natural *tamasic* dark night of deep ignorance (of Arjuna), and roared the sweet and soothing Gita, that person (Krishna) has now been born as Sri Ramakrishna.' Here none of the attributes of Sri Krishna are left out and none repeated. The grandeur, the beauty, the mighty power, and the mellow sweetness, all have found their place and what is not expressed can easily be comprehended. Picture the battle-field of Kurukshetra with the armies arrayed, taut and restive for battle, with the trumpets blowing fiercely and cohorts marching. Picture again the undaunting yet smiling, ready for action yet not anxious, calm and serene yet not yielding nor inactive figure of Sri Krishna as he is seated on the chariot of Arjuna, resplendent in his own glory yet in the humble role of a charioteer. That is the picture, a perfect combination of contradictions.

He was not only himself immune to all the outside tumult but was in a position to quell the storms raging in the inner mind of Arjuna, to make him see the depth of his ignorance in his misdirected pity and to convince him of the righteousness of the battle. His patience and forbearance at the folly of Arjuna in the nick of time, is something that inspires admiration. He was patient enough to recount the entire Hindu philosophy to teach the disciple, who had approached in the proper way, righteousness and religion. Swami Vivekananda from his personal experience declared: 'Words, even thoughts, contribute only one-third of the influence in making an impression, the man, two-thirds.' That it is so we too may experience in our life, if we but care to note it. We might have listened to grand oratorical performances, couched in the most beautiful language, presented in a cogent manner, and delivered with a logical coherence, only to be forgotten after a while, whereas the words of some lone personality uttered in a rustic tongue and perhaps in an ungrammatical way would have left a lasting impression on us. Swami Vivekananda saw before his very eyes the transformation of scores of people who approached Sri Ramakrishna. Pandits of the old type as well as the scholars of the modern times sat at his feet forgetting all about their scholarship to learn from him, an almost unlettered priest. Likewise it was the personality of Sri Krishna that imparted weight to his words.

What is this personality? It is the life lived to perfection that unfolds the personality. Such a life is a tremendous power. Such a person is a blessing not only to himself but to thousands who come in contact with him while living in the body and millions when he is no more in the physical frame. Some millenniums have rolled on after Sri Krishna preached the Gita, still the influence Sri Krishna wields over the minds of the earnest seekers has not abated in the least. Maybe, only one Arjuna was benefited at that time but that saved the cause of righteousness. Innumerable persons have been saved later, when placed under similar situations, by the precepts of the Gita. 'Sri Krishna can never be understood until you have studied the Gita, for he was the embodiment of his own teaching,' opines Swami Vivekananda. And how true it is! Take for instance the message of unattachment to the fruits of actions. Coming from his lips it has a meaning vast and pro-found, for he was himself an



illustration of what he taught. He put down many a tyrant but never cared to rule over any kingdom. What need had he to take on the role of a charioteer of Arjuna and groom the horses at the end of the days fighting? Sri Krishna himself declares: 'O Partha, I have no duty to perform; nor is there anything in the three worlds unattained that I have to attain, still I am engaged in action.'<sup>2</sup>

Arjuna's delusion was very deep. He was ready even to live by begging as a mendicant instead of doing his duty. The task of retrieving him was formidable. Sri Krishna, an expert teacher that he was, points out at the very outset, to Arjuna his folly. First he tackles him on the metaphysical plane. What did he grieve for? For the death of the bodies? They were but changes like childhood, youth and old age. One discarded them like worn out garments, to enter into new ones. The real man was the soul which was eternally present: in the past, present and the future. The soul is immutable and hence there is no cause for grief on its account.

Again, whatever is born must die. And what reason is there to grieve on account of that which is inevitable. These creatures were not manifest in the past and again they will be unmanifest in the future. They have this manifest existence only for a short duration, so why should they be grieved over? Krishna then takes up the cause of dharma, in the name of which Arjuna thought he was making a great sacrifice in renouncing his duty. It is the duty of a warrior to fight a righteous war. There is no other duty for a warrior so sacred than to fight such a war. If he falls in the battle he goes to heaven, and if he succeeds he enjoys the fruits here, in this world. So, one should try to see pleasure and pain, and loss and gain with an equal eye and fight on.

Next Sri Krishna delivers his great message of selfless work, the way of action (Karma Yoga), for getting rid of the bondage of work. He says, 'In this, there is no waste of undertaking nor chance of incurring sin; even a little of this religion saves one from great danger.'<sup>3</sup> And in this Yoga, 'You have the right only to do action and not to claim its results.' For, once a man hankers after the results, the chains of karma are clamped down on him. He becomes miserable, when he does not reap the expected harvest. By following the path of Karma Yoga one is able to attain Self-realization too and thus free himself from birth and death. This, and not going to heaven, is the final aim of all human endeavour.

Arjuna then asks, 'If in your opinion knowledge is superior to action why do you goad me to do work, which is fraught with danger.' 'A two-fold faith has been declared by Me for this human race; the way of knowledge for the Jnanis and the way of action for the Karma yogins,' says Sri Krishna. But all are not fit to adopt the way of knowledge. By mere giving up of action one does not attain to liberation. The human mind and body are such that not a single moment passes without their doing work. Man is forced to work by his inborn propensities. Even for maintenance of one's own body work is necessary, therefore, Krishna asks Arjuna to perform the prescribed duties. The creation depends on sacrifice not in the sense of pouring libations into the fire alone, but sacrifice of self-interest too. What does even a sacrifice signify except offering of the best things into the sacrificial fire, an act of sacrifice of self-interest? Therefore one should incessantly perform prescribed actions, unattached. By that one will attain the highest.

Thus did Krishna gradually and slowly lead Arjuna out of the maze of delusion, answering all his queries and anticipating the pupil's doubts until Arjuna finally surrenders: 'Dispelled is my infatuation. I have gained back my steady wisdom by your grace, and freed from all doubts as I am, I shall do your bidding.' That, a true teacher never lets down his disciple, whom he has accepted, has been proved by Sri Krishna. Sri Ramakrishna likens such a teacher to a first rate physician who, if necessary, will force the medicine down the throat of the patient.

What is the speciality of Sri Krishna's teaching? It appears that by the time of



Krishna's preaching the Gita, there were two antagonistic sections in the Hindu society, who vied with one another to establish their own view of religion as final — one party claiming that religion meant only performance of sacrifices as enjoined the Vedas, relegating to a secondary position all the other portions. Sri Krishna paints a picture of these in the following words: 'People of feeble intellect, with minds full of desire, regarding heaven as their ultimate goal, enamoured of the panegyric statements of the Vedas and asserting that there is nothing else (higher than this), speak flowery words about numerous kinds of rites giving rise to birth, actions, and their results, as the means to enjoyment and power.'<sup>4</sup> The other party were those who followed the path of knowledge condemning all karma as of no use in the way to liberation. Sri Krishna however, saw the impracticability of the views of both the sections. What was one, who was satiated with the pleasures of the worlds, to do if the heaven was accepted as an ultimate goal? This proposition, therefore, precipitately falls to the ground. Such a man has a right for a higher life of liberation. Are we then to force others into one camp or the other? The answer is no. Those who want to enjoy will follow the first and those who are satiated with pleasures will renounce. But there will still be a great many who will like to be liberated but have not that strong renunciation. What were they to do? Sri Krishna showed them the path of Karma Yoga.

They were not to give up their sacrifices and their duties, but only had to sublimate them by being unattached to the fruits of their actions or to perform them as an offering to God. In this way, they will gradually rise higher and higher until all desires drop away. The process may be gradual but sure. And this is the greatest message of the Gita.

One other contribution of Sri Krishna was, to harmonize all the Yogas, to reconcile all the paths, imparting equal importance to each one of the pathways. All paths, he said, lead to the same goal. The different paths existed only to suit the aptitudes of the aspirants. Arjuna raises the question: 'Among those devotees who worship you, being ever devoted to you and those who worship the Imperishable, the Unmanifest, who are better versed in Yoga.'<sup>5</sup> Sri Krishna says, 'They who worship Me alone endowed with supreme faith, they are of course the best yogins,'<sup>6</sup> but he immediately hastens to add, 'those who worship the Imperishable, Changeless, Unmanifest also attain Me alone.'<sup>7</sup> So there is no question of one path being superior to another. Sri Ramakrishna in his inimitable way expressed the same thought: 'The cake tastes sweet whether you eat it straight or side ways.' The main thing is to attain the Goal. There is a significant saying of Sri Krishna wherein he affirms that all sects, knowingly or unknowingly, worship Him alone. 'All truths are strung in Him as pearls upon a string.'

The exquisite passages depicting a man of established wisdom, one who has transcended the three gunas, a knower of Brahman, a real bhakta, are some of the highlights of the Gita, wherein all other considerations of what path the aspirant follows, are completely left behind. The one crucial test applied in all cases being whether the aspirant satisfies these descriptions. There is no essential difference in the descriptions of the various perfected souls. Everywhere stress is on the conquest of desires, control of the senses, the annihilation of the ego, mental equipoise in pain and pleasure, and same-sightedness towards all creatures. 'Such people,' says Sri Krishna, 'whose minds are in equipoise, have conquered rebirth here and now. For, they have attained that pure state of Brahman.' Reaching this state man does not come under the spell of delusion or nescience. So it is a wonder that leaving aside the essentials, man fights over the non-essentials such as dogma, form, and creed, and gets hopelessly lost and leads others too astray.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhagavadgita, II.7.

<sup>2</sup> Bhagavadgita, III.22.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., II.40.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., II. 42-43.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., XII.1.



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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., XII.2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., XII.3 and XII.4.



**By Swami Paratparananda**

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In the Rig Veda there is a hymn devoted to *Sraddha*<sup>1</sup>, as a goddess in which the Rishi prays to her, that he may have devotion to the sacrifices he performs and the work that he does in this world. Sayanacarya commenting on this *sukta* says, ‘*Sraddha* is a special affection which is imbedded in man.’ Continuing he terms it as a distinctive reverence, for a particular object or principle. The author of the *Vedantasara* puts it as ‘the faith in the words of the scriptures as taught by the guru or teacher.’<sup>2</sup>

We experience that without a little faith, a little trust no action, be it secular or religious, is possible. We take on trust many things. We put faith in a great many people and then alone transactions become feasible, life becomes a possibility. We believe in certain principles as conducive to our welfare and strive to work them out in life. How tenaciously and persistently do not people hold on to their particular political views! That is faith. Unless one has faith in what he does, he would not be able to turn out any work satisfactorily. Religion, therefore, does not claim any special allegiance when it says you should have *sraddha*, faith, in the words of one whom you have accepted as a teacher.

The Hindu scriptures are not dogmatic that you have to subscribe to some particular creeds for your emancipation. Nay they go a step further and say that one has to go beyond the scriptures, one has to go beyond all laws, if one has to be liberated. For, everything within law is a limitation, freedom is beyond all law, but the way lies through the scriptures. Simply knowing the truth intellectually and harping on the eminence of one's own scriptures is not enough. We have to verify the propositions, the principles, enunciated in the scriptures in our own lives. One who has true *sraddha* in the statement of the scriptures, waits not for any one to goad him onward. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: ‘Suppose there is a thief in a room and he has come to know that a great treasure lies separated from him only by a thin wall, can he rest content only to know about it? Will he not try to possess it?’ *Sraddha* is like that. It makes one restless to possess what one prizes most and it serves as the motive power which makes man jump into the fray and fight on courageously towards the noble end, God-realization.

Like the scriptures, the true teachers do not demand unquestioned obedience, they are ever ready to satisfy the doubts of a genuine seeker. What they demand is, that the seeker should be sincere and not simply a stoic who argues for the sake of argumentation. Swami Vivekananda in a telling manner implants the idea of faith, when he says: ‘What use is belief in God if we do not see Him? What use is the faith that we have a soul if we do not experience it?’ That kind of firm belief is *Sraddha*.

With the advance of science and technology, faith of the people in religion has waned. Physical science has usurped, as it were, the place of the scriptures. Now this physical science says: man is no more than an animal. Why? because it cannot see man except as a body. The other part, the real being, of man lies hidden from its view, is beyond its ken, since it is not material. Scientists in the beginning doubted the existence of soul, as they did not come across anything like it during the process of dissection of the bodies. They called the idea of soul and religion as idle fancy of some deranged brains. The first psychologists or to quote a Western



scholar ‘the medical materialists’ said with impunity that the soul-flights of the saints were ‘nothing but’ expressions of their organic disorder. But the science of the soul, religion, smiled at their vain prattle and allowed them to rattle on, never for once disbelieving in its well-verified conclusions. Religion firmly asserted that man is divine. Swami Vivekananda boldly declared, ‘Man is potentially divine’. The Upanisads say, ‘Thou art That’<sup>3</sup> (the Infinite Being)’ from whom the whole universe is projected, in whom it is maintained, and into whom it dissolves again.

Here a little digression is inevitable. It may be asked, ‘Will not man become egotistic thinking himself to be the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer of the universe?’ A little thought bestowed on the above statement will surely set at rest all such questions. Can any thoughtful person comprehend this universe to have emanated from his body? Can he ever think that the whole universe, with its varieties of manifestations outside himself, is maintained in his body? Does he dare believe that the whole universe will last only as long as his body lasts? An emphatic negative will be the reply. The Upanisads, therefore, certainly do not refer to the body when they say ‘Thou art That’, but to the Atman, the Indwelling Spirit, the ‘self’. So there is no way, for a man who knows this truth, to be egotistic and no man can be said to have known this truth as long as he identifies himself with the body. The Atman of course should have recourse to a vehicle to manifest Itself, just as we have to take the aid of some conveyance for any journey, short or long. Now the body forms the vehicle for the Atman.

Man, however, identifies himself with the vehicle, the body, and forgets himself in catering to its needs. It is true that man as a body is no more than an animal, so when he identifies with the body he displays all the qualities of an animal. The instincts of self-preservation, sense-enjoyment, distrust, malignity, passion and the like are most prominent at that time. But, even in the life of the vilest man some moments come when he evidences magnanimity, affection, compassion and beneficence which are his inherent divine qualities. These are the moments when the flashes of the real man come to the forefront overpowering the animal nature. The struggle in life, the goal of religion, is to convert these rare moments into a continuous experience: to subdue the animal nature once and for all time. And here it is that *Sraddha* helps as a great asset.

### ***Sraddha as distinctive reverence***

Of the above three definitions of *Sraddha* we shall first take up *Sraddha* as distinctive reverence. He who performs sacrifices or does works or endows gifts without reverence for the sacrifice, or the cause for which he works or donates, only wastes his time and energy. He does not reap any fruits either here or after death, says the Bhagavad Gita<sup>4</sup>. The Upanisads are categorical in this respect. They prohibit man from giving when he has no reverence for the cause<sup>5</sup>. Kathopanisad illustrates this by a story: There was a person named Vajasravas. He performed a sacrifice. One of the conditions of the sacrifice was to give away every good thing that the sacrificer possessed. But this man was a miser. So after the sacrifice he gave as fee to the Brahmanas only old, jaded and dried up useless cows<sup>6</sup>. He had a son. Though a boy he found that what his father professed and did, did not tally. The Upanisad says, ‘*Sraddha* entered into this boy at this time<sup>7</sup>’. The boy found that his father had no *Sraddha* in the sacrifice or in giving gifts. The father hankered only after the merit. He wanted to save the father from going to a region of eternal misery by giving such useless gifts. He questioned, ‘Father, whom are you going to give me!’ The father kept quiet. A second and third time the boy repeated the question. The father got annoyed at the audacity of the boy and said, ‘I am giving you to Yama, the King of Death’. Undaunted the boy started for Yama’s abode straightway. The father was disconsolate. The boy,



however, consoled his father saying that everything born, like vegetation that grows and dies and sprouts again, had to die, and so there was no use in worrying over the bygone. Now, *Sraddha* brought the boy Naciketas to the abode of Yama and from Yama he learnt self-knowledge, the way for liberation and returned an enlightened soul.

Again the Rig Veda *sukta* referred to here, in the beginning, says one should kindle the fire, for sacrifice with *sraddha*. The oblations thus offered with *Sraddha* obtain for the sacrificer results in abundance. The sacrificer endowed with *Sraddha* is himself referred to by the name of *Sraddha* when he goes to heaven. For it is that reverence and faith in the sacrifice and the scriptures, that makes him go to heaven. So whether one seeks enjoyment or liberation one should have reverence and faith in the duties he does.

### ***Sraddha as affection***

*Sraddha* as affection we come across every day of our life. The mother serves the household, and the guests with *Sraddha*. Love and affection cannot generate without *Sraddha*. Indiscipline is rampant in the schools and colleges today. Why? because students have no *Sraddha* in the education they receive, nor in the teachers. Education (*vidya*) in olden days was considered as the highest gift,—next to spirituality—one could give. It was looked upon as the boon of goddess Saraswati. That *Sraddha* has left the portals of the ‘Temples of Learning’ in the present age, and therefore, we suffer. Revive the affection, the *Sraddha*, for the education and the teacher, and everything will set itself right again. That *Sraddha* itself will direct our steps.

### ***Sraddha as faith in the Guru’s words***

Though a distinction has been made in the definitions of the three types of *sraddha* for the sake of illustration, it is not possible to say where one begins and the other ends. All these qualities are inseparable. One supplements the other. When any one is present, the other two effortlessly follow. *Sraddha* is child-like faith.

If the mother says pointing to a man, ‘He is your elder brother’ the child believes that the man is his brother: Similarly in every action the child implicitly believes the mother. Many are the stories which Sri Ramakrishna told the devotees to impress upon them the necessity of *Sraddha*, faith, in the words of the guru. He once said: ‘There was a boy named Jatila. He used to walk to school through the woods, and the journey frightened him. One day he told his mother, of his fear. But what could the mother do? She was too poor to provide a servant. Yet she was a devotee of the Lord. She inwardly prayed to the Lord to protect her child. She replied: “Why should you be afraid? Call Madhusudana.” “Mother,” asked the boy, “Who is Madhusudana?” The mother said, “He is your Elder Brother and lives in the woods.” One day after this, when the boy again felt afraid in the woods he cried out, “O Madhusudana.” But there was no response. He began to weep aloud. “Where are you Brother Madhusudana? Come to me. I am afraid.” Then God could no longer stay away. He appeared before the boy and said: “Here I am. Why are you frightened?” And so saying he took the boy out of the woods and showed him the way to school. When He took leave of the boy, God said: “I will come whenever you call Me. Do not be afraid.”’ One must have such child-like faith in the words of the teacher, and such yearning to realize the goal.



## ***Efficacy of Sraddha***

Efficacy of faith can never be over-estimated. The foregoing stories bear ample testimony to this fact. But lest it should be thought that these are mere fables and fairy tales for enticing the child-minds, let us narrate some recent events. Sri Girish Chandra Ghosh, the father of the Bengali stage, was leading a Bohemian life before he met Sri Ramakrishna. But his meeting with the Master proved to be the turning point in his life. He was more and more attracted towards Sri Ramakrishna. His estimation of the Master increased with every visit. Gradually the conviction grew upon him that the Master was none other than God Himself come down to redeem mankind. That faith had a great effect on his character. His vices left him one by one until at last to remember the Master became the one ruling passion of his life. A sinner was transformed into a saint. That is the miracle of *Sraddha*.

Again, Swami Adbhutananda, Latu Maharaj, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, though he began his life as a servant boy in one of the Master's devotee's house, soon ascended the pinnacle of realizations by simple faith. A childlike faith he had in Sri Ramakrishna. The Guru's words were like mandates from on High. He unquestioningly followed them. He had no doubts. The Master, was his pole-star. Like the proverbial oyster that sinks down to the bottom of the sea after receiving a drop of rain to turn out a beautiful pearl, he shut himself within himself and following the teachings of the Master became a saint in his own right. Literally illiterate though he was, no philosophy was a closed book to him. This was, as it were, confirming the famous passage of the Gita: 'A person of firm faith attains knowledge being devoted to it by restraining the senses; and obtaining the knowledge he attains peace that passes all understanding.'<sup>10</sup>

Again it is common knowledge that the doubting Narendranath converted himself into the world-shaking Swami Vivekananda by his wonderful *Sraddha* in the Master's words.

## ***Different types of Sraddha***

*Sraddha*, again, is of three types. Every-one has faith according to the propensities with which he is born and as is his faith so does he become<sup>11</sup>. Man, according to the Sankhyas is made of three constituents, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. In every person all these qualities are present in a more or lesser degree. The difference between man and man is because of the predominance of some one constituent. If *sattva* happens to preponderate such a man's faith will tend towards respect to elders, towards worship of God, and the like. If *rajas* were to be prepotent the person will lean towards the worship of other gods; will be having great avidity for name and fame. If *tamas* were to be inordinately prevalent his inclination will be towards the worship of ghosts and spirits. Man's all activities can be attributed to the working of these constituents. The proportion in which they exist in man goes to form his nature, which Sri Krishna calls as *prakriti*, and is commonly known as character.

## ***Perfection of character the goal of all religion***

Now this character or nature has to be cleansed of its dross, is to be perfected so that it may give place for the play of higher and nobler faith. All the scriptures aim at this. A man cannot be truly religious if he happens to be imperfect in character. True *sraddha* dawns only in a perfected nature. So in the initial stages *sraddha* is to be cultivated and for that all concomitant



forces or qualities are to be developed. When the perfection in character is attained then does one realize God. Only on realization of God, adamant faith, complete *sraddha* in God takes firm root. Till then all belief in God is subject to vacillation. Our aim in life should be to have that adamant faith. *Sraddha* is thus the guiding factor of religious life from the beginning to the end. Without *sraddha* religious life amounts to nothing. With *sraddha* it is everything.

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<sup>1</sup> Rig Veda, 10 Mand. 151 Sukta.

<sup>2</sup> –24.

<sup>3</sup> Chandogya, VI.viii. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Gita, 17.28.

<sup>5</sup> Taittiriya Up. 1.11.3.

<sup>6</sup> Katha Up. 1.3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 1. 2.

<sup>8</sup> 10.151.1.

<sup>9</sup> Chand. Up. 5.4.2.

<sup>10</sup> Gita, 4.39.

<sup>11</sup> Gita, 17.3.



By Swami Paratparananda

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*Prevalent notion and how far it is true*

The prevalent notion about knowledge is that, of possession of book-learning, information about the scientific and technological advance, and the intellect to utilize the information thus gathered for the improvement, maintenance and furtherance of one's material condition. And, all our education today is directed towards this one object, of gaining material knowledge and its utilization. Lack of such knowledge is considered in common parlance as ignorance. This is the standard by which civilization and progress of a country is judged at the present juncture. The greater the number of scientists a country can produce, the vaster its power to build huge industries, the more advanced and progressive it is considered to be.

While we do not say it is bad, we only urge that we should move onward and not stagnate. The stream of life must flow on. There should be a flow in the ideas, the thought-current should be able to irrigate vaster fields. It should give us incentive to be active, to be progressive in contributing to world-peace. The moment we put a barrier to our thinking, raise a wall, as it were, and cut ourselves off from the spirit, degradation sets in. We become onesided. Our development contracts lop-sidedness. For, man is not merely a lump of matter but spirit as well. Without the spirit, matter is powerless because matter as such, being inert, cannot act independently of the spirit. It has no purpose of its own to serve. A conscious entity alone can strive for something. The Samkhyas, the first and foremost evolutionists, stressed that *prakrti* (matter) exists and works for the sake of the *purusa* (the spirit) alone. The insentient *prakrti* works in the presence of the *purusa*, being, by itself, incapable of performing any action. There should therefore be a harmonious growth of the body, coupled with the uncovering of the spirit. So this knowledge of the sciences, which helps to drive away the crude notions of the geography of the world and the like, which enables us to extend the horizons of the various sciences to enormous magnitudes, and which develops our intelligence, should be utilized for the better understanding of the spirit as well. If we do not cultivate the spirit of introspection, how different are we from animals? Man is man because he can think of higher things.

This knowledge which would bring only material prosperity even the birds and beasts possess. In the Devi Mahatmyam there is a story very illustrative of this: Suratha, a king deprived of his kingdom and living in a forest, still broods over the fate of his pet elephant and the erstwhile treasures which had fallen into the unscrupulous hands of the enemies. He understands that it is unprofitable to think of them, yet he could not shake off his attachment. He approaches a hermit named Medhas and places his doubt before him: 'Why, O wise one, we, who are possessed of knowledge, are repeatedly attracted to our past associations though they have been bitter, and are thus deluded?' The reply of the Muni is significant. 'Every being has this knowledge of objects perceivable by the senses. Man is certainly endowed with it, but it is not his exclusive possession, for that kind of knowledge even the cattle, birds and other creatures are seen to enjoy.'<sup>1</sup>



Overtly it means we are no better than animals if we confine our knowledge to these things alone.

The lower creatures may not be knowing about the nuclear fusion or nuclear fallout, may not know about space or inter-planetary travel, but that does not in any way stand in their living of life. Man by his rapid strides in the scientific field creates problems which he himself finds too formidable to surmount, whereas other creatures adjust by change of surroundings or change in their internal organism. They instinctively develop, while man with his superior intelligence only gropes in the dark and gets frightened. So material knowledge alone cannot be made the be-all and end-all of life.

Similarly, ignorance of these sciences does not necessarily mean the ignorance of the animal type. Maybe, one may not be able to express one's ideas in attractive language or understand everything that goes on in this wise world of ours, but on that account one may not be classed in the category of fools. Perhaps he is better aware of the eternal values than most of the so-called learned or wise. 'M' the recorder of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna has, by faithfully placing before us his own discomfiture in an analogous situation, compelled our attention to understand what is knowledge and what is ignorance. Let us recollect the background: It was M's second visit to the Master. After some enquiries, 'Sri Ramakrishna looked at him kindly and said affectionately: "You see, you have certain good signs. I know them by looking at a person's forehead, his eyes and so on. Tell me now what kind of a person is your wife? Has she spiritual attributes, or is she under the power of avidya?"

M: "She is all right. But I am afraid she is ignorant."

Master (*with evident displeasure*): "And you are a man of knowledge?"

It was a rude shock for a man learned in the Western way to have been bluntly challenged in this manner. His own reflections on being thus addressed are worthy of our deep thought. He acknowledges: 'M had yet to learn the distinction between knowledge and ignorance. Up to this time his conception had been that one got knowledge from books and schools. Later on he gave up this false conception.'

### ***Two types of knowledge***

Knowledge can be sub-divided into two types. One knowledge which is cognizable by the senses and the other the intuitive, which is not of this world and which cannot be grasped by the senses. The *Mundaka Upanisad* makes this essential division: 'Two kinds of knowledge are to be acquired — the higher and the lower. The lower knowledge includes the four Vedas, Rig, Yajus, Sama and Atharva, and the Vedangas, like the science of pronunciation, the code of rituals, grammar, etymology, metre, and astrology. Then there is the higher (knowledge) by which the Immutable is realized.' This is a bold statement by the Sruti. It says that even knowledge of the Vedas, which is considered to be the breath of the Lord, is given a lower position compared with that other knowledge by which one attains union with the Lord, what then to speak of knowledge of other sciences! The knowledge acquired through the senses can at best give us only worldly enjoyment.

At this point an objection may be raised: 'How can the knowledge (of Brahman) which is outside the Vedas be higher and how can it lead to emancipation, since it is traditionally accepted that the Smrtis, that are outside the pale of the Vedas and others perverted in their views, are useless as pathways to liberation? If such a view i.e., that the higher knowledge is outside the Vedas, is accepted then the Upanisads will have to be considered as outside the Vedas, which argument is definitely illogical.' Sankara



refuting this objection says, 'It is not so, since by knowledge (*vidya*) is implied the realization of the thing to be known. What is chiefly meant to be conveyed by 'higher knowledge' is the knowledge of the Immutable which is what the Upanisads actually mean. It is not the mere collection of words that constitute the Upanisad. The books are called Upanisads in a secondary sense because of the know-ledge therein contained. Without renunciation, and such other prerequisites, by the mere knowledge of the words of the Vedas, the 'higher knowledge' cannot be attained.'<sup>3</sup>

Further, in the Vivekachudamani, he explicitly and definitely says: 'Grand-eloquence, fluency in speech, dexterity in expounding the Sastras, contribute like the wisdom of the scholars, to enjoyment of the senses but never lead to emancipation.'<sup>4</sup> Sri Ramakrishna, even as a boy, with his keen intellect evaluated the worth of this lower knowledge. He noticed with what end in view the pundits carried on their debates for hours together. He marked that it was all for the paltry and petty things of the world, and designated such education as 'bread-winning'. In disgust he discarded it and turned away from it for ever. In the later years he taught all those who came in contact with him, what he had learnt and practised all through his life: that to know God is knowledge and it is the only knowledge worth striving for. 'God alone is real, everything else is unreal. This alone is knowledge, all other knowledge is worthless', said he. About mere scholarship he used to say: 'Kites rise high in the sky but their gaze is fixed only on the charnel-pit below, likewise mere scholars may soar high in their intellectual attainments but their heart is always attracted towards sense-enjoyments.' What an enormous difference there is between acquisition of intellectual knowledge, and gaining of immediate experience of the Highest Reality. The former can be compared to a man learning to swim by reading books on swimming without getting into water. Sri Ramakrishna used to maintain: 'You cannot get a drop of water by squeezing the pages of the almanac which foretells hundreds of inches of rainfall.' This immediate experience, Vedanta calls as *aparoksanubhuti* or *Brahma-saksatkara*.

### ***Nature of 'Higher Knowledge'***

It has already been described that 'higher knowledge' leads to God-vision, the attainment of the Immutable, the Ultimate Reality. It is aptly described as of the nature of light, since it is the only thing that is able to disclose the Atman hidden in the innermost recesses of our heart. It alone dispels the darkness of ignorance which has accumulated in our minds for ages. Through it, one comes to know the relation between the *jiva* and Paramatma. By its agency one is able to commune with Him. Nay, it confers Brahmanhood itself on man. 'Verily, whosoever knows of the Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman,'<sup>5</sup> says Mundaka Upanisad. When that state of knowledge is attained the differences between the knower, knowledge and the known is annihilated and the resplendent One alone shines in its true glory. 'There, neither the sun, the moon, the stars nor even the lightning shines, what then to speak of this mortal fire! All these shine through Its shining. By its brilliance all this is perceived,'<sup>6</sup> declares the Sruti.

By knowing the One — God, Brahman or by whatever name we may call It — everything else that is to be known becomes known, because in reality there exists nothing else except Brahman. The variety and the panorama we see are only names and forms of this One substance, like the various ornaments of gold differently called do not have a separate existence from that of gold. Brahman is the only reality. The world seems real because of the substratum of Brahman. Again, it is of the nature of bliss. Attaining it all other gains taste insipid.



Strange misgivings may arise at this juncture. One may ask, 'If obtaining this 'higher knowledge', one loses one's individuality what is the use of such knowledge? We require knowledge to alleviate our misery and elevate our hopes of living a comfortable life. If, therefore, by this knowledge we lose our individuality itself, how can we enjoy?' True, we cannot, but we forget that all our miseries, trials and tribulations are due to this clinging to individuality. If we want to transcend misery we have to forego this separateness, lose it in the ocean of *Satchidananda*. There is no other way. Sankara describes the condition of a person who tries to attain God while still holding to his bodily needs, as that of one who attempts to cross a river with the help of a crocodile mistaking it for a log of wood.

Whether you are a bhakta or a jnani it matters little, unless we sink our boat of ego we won't be able to dive into the ocean of Highest Bliss. Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the cow whose miseries did not end even after its death till its entrails began to sing the note, 'Tuhu, Tuhu, Thou, 'Thou, O Lord not I,' on the carder's bow, is very apposite to the case of a devotee. Devotion means, continuous thought of the Lord, even a little forgetfulness of whom brings pain. Where then is the scope for the play of the ego in such a heart?

A jnani meditates: 'I am neither the body, nor the senses, neither the mind nor the intelligence, I am the Eternal Bliss and Awareness, I am Brahman.' His small ego is destroyed and has merged in Brahman like the water inside a jar dipped in a reservoir mingles with the vast sheet of water, when the jar too is broken, or like the *akasa* contained in a pot becomes one with the *Mahakasa* when the pot is destroyed. The elements merge into their origin. It is like one's home-coming. And why should we be afraid of going back to our own home? It is like the child's return to its mother. Is it afraid of returning to the mother's arms? On one occasion Sri Ramakrishna asked Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda): 'Well, my child, suppose there is a cup of nectar and you are like a fly. How would you like to taste it?' Narendranath replied: 'I would sit on the edge of the cup and drink it. If I venture further I would drown and die?' 'No, my boy, you will not die. It is the ocean of nectar, of immortality. One becomes immortal by diving into it. Dive and drink deep of it.'

Swami Vivekananda realized this, experienced such a state, and then dispelled fear from those who entertained identical doubts by such homely similes as: 'There was once a rain drop which fell into the ocean and it began to weep. The ocean asked the rain drop what ailed it. It said I am losing my identity. The ocean laughed and said, "No, my dear, you are becoming one with your brothers and sisters here. But if, however, you find your life miserable rise above through the sun's rays and travel as you wish, but then you will have to face the rugged mountains and such other hardships.'" So also if at all we want eternal peace we have to lose our identity, our ego. It is only those who want to hold on to both the world and God that are afraid of losing their individuality and not a true lover of God.

### ***What is Ignorance?***

In an age of rationality man wants to know, why and what for of everything before he makes a move. We cannot brush aside this tendency of the age. The purpose of knowledge is therefore to be stated. In a few words it can be said that the purpose is to dispel ignorance that has been enveloping us. What is this ignorance? We have briefly stated, in the beginning, what it is not. Now let us see what it is. Ignorance is described as *maya* or *avidya*, in Indian Philosophy. It is the not-knowing of the essence of our nature, which is Satchidananda, that is called ignorance. Man thinks himself to



be the body, the senses, or at the most an intellectual being, but never for once remembers his true nature. This is ignorance. Due to this identification he is impelled by the desires of the body, senses, and mind to work for their fulfilment. Like a bullock yoked to an oil mill — stretching its neck to get at the wisp of straw that dangles before it, but never reaches it — man works the mill of this world with a view to attain those little ever eluding tinsels of this world, those little comforts.

Man is familiar with the words, ‘I’ and ‘mine’. How often do we not use this word in a day? But are we conscious of what we really mean at that time? We say: this wealth, this property, these people are mine. I shall enjoy this wealth. I shall amass more wealth. I am fair. I am dark. I am learned. I am ignorant. I am happy. I am miserable. All the time our identification is with the body, senses or mind. This, Sri Ramakrishna says, is ignorance.

Again he said ‘lust and lucre’ constitute ignorance, and the whole world knows how true it is! To accept the world and worldly things as they appear, to be real and to run after them is ignorance.

### ***Whence this ignorance and what is its nature?***

If our real nature is knowledge whence comes this ignorance? For, if knowledge is of the nature of light, it should not be clouded. Not so, for do we not find even the powerful sun being covered by a small cloud. How paltry is the cloud and how enormous is the sun. Yet does not the cloud, locally at least, prevent the sun being seen, from shining? Ignorance also similarly holds knowledge in abeyance by covering it, as it were. Ignorance sprouts from, our sages say, our desires and attachment. And these desires are due to our past actions (karma) and they in their turn are the effect of our actions in previous incarnations and so on. But whence did the first desire arise? To ask this question is to ask which was first the seed or the tree, the egg or the bird. Indian philosophers hold that these desires had no beginning, as also this ignorance. Its nature is that of darkness, of covering and projecting. In darkness we cannot see all things and many things that we see are not seen as they are. For instance, one sees a rope and mistakes it for a snake. The stump of a tree in darkness appears to one person as a ghost, to a thief as the policeman and to a lover as the beloved. Again it is like the mirage in the desert, creating wonderful pictures of lakes and landscape but with no actual reality behind it. Ignorance is so powerful that most of us in spite of our pride of knowledge, scientific and scriptural, are in it. Very few, perhaps one in a million, may escape its clutches. And those it is that show us that ignorance can be ended, that it can be overcome by knowledge. Bring in a light and the darkness even though of thousands of years’ duration, immediately vanishes.

Realizing our own nature as knowledge, ignorance in the form of conjured up images of this world falls off. And how does such a man live in this world? Let us quote Swami Vivekananda: ‘Once in Western India I was travelling in the desert country. For days and days I used to travel on foot through the desert, but it was to my surprise that I saw every day beautiful lakes, with trees all round them, and the shadows of the trees upside down and vibrating there. “How wonderful it looks and they call this a desert country!” I said to myself. Nearly a month I travelled, seeing these wonderful lakes and trees and plants. One day I was very thirsty and wanted to have a drink of water, so I started to go to one of these clear, beautiful lakes, and as I approached, it vanished. And with a flash it came to my mind, “This is the mirage about which I have



read all my life,” and with that came also the idea that throughout the whole of this month, everyday, I had been seeing the mirage and did not know it. The next morning I began my march. There was again the lake, but with it came also the idea that it was the mirage and not a true lake. So is it with this universe. We are all travelling in this mirage of the world day after day, month after month, year after year, not knowing that it is a mirage. One day it will break up, but it will come back again; the body has to remain under the power of past Karma, and so the mirage will come back. This world will come back upon us so long as we are bound by Karma: men, women, animals, plants, our attachments and duties, all will come back to us, but not with the same power. Under the influence of the new knowledge the strength of Karma will be broken, its poison will be lost. It becomes transformed, for along with it there comes the idea that we know it now, that the sharp distinction between the reality and the mirage has been known’<sup>7</sup> Such then is the nature of ignorance and such is its end.

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<sup>1</sup> Devi Mahatmya 1.47 & 49.

<sup>2</sup> Mundaka 1.1.4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Sankara Bhashya on the above sloka.

<sup>4</sup> Vivekachudamani 60.

<sup>5</sup> Mundaka Up. 3.2.8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 2.2.11. Also, Svetasvatara 6.14. Katha 5.15.

<sup>7</sup> Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. II, pages 281-2.



**By Swami Paratparananda**

\* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – December 1962; Vol. 49; page 322

The Holy Mother is not an unknown personality today; her name has crossed the geographical boundaries of India and gone across the oceans. Her personality has already influenced a great many lives and still continues to do so. Her message is spreading and showering benediction on and solace to many a parched soul in the burning desert of this world. Her task of saving humanity began, we can say, even during the life-time of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna pleaded with her to aid him in his mission of saving humanity, which was forgetful of its true nature and was getting itself submerged in the quagmire of this world. After the passing away of the Master, the magnitude of her work increased, the limits of her sphere of action widened. The responsibility of the restitution of the world devolved on her. And this she silently did. Though she shunned all lime-light and preferred seclusion, she could not totally shut herself up for long. When was it possible to hide a fire under a bush? When was it possible to restrain the sweet mountain breeze from bringing its soothing effect to everyone? At first people began to come to her in trickles, but soon this stream gathered in strength and became a torrent. Even residing at her native village at Jayarambati, which was not easily accessible at that time, she could not stem the tide of the stream of devotees. People reached her there too. Later in her life, she actually longed for some respite but that was not vouchsafed to her. In disease and tribulations too, she had to fulfil the importunities of her disciples. This extensive influence of the Mother attracts one to know more about her personality. The intensive effect of her teachings sets one thinking to peep, probe and penetrate into those ambrosial words.

We shall take up a few of her precepts and try to understand their meaning, in the light of her life; for there is no other commentary more clear in its perspective and more precise in its definition on the exhortations of a great spiritual teacher than his or her own life. The precepts are corroborated, substantiated and exemplified in their lives. This is the main difference between a talker and a teacher: that the talker talks but never practises whereas the teacher practises and out of the fullness of his heart he speaks, not for the sake of speaking but out of compassion for seekers. They (the teachers) never advertise their greatness. They act as humble servants of humanity though commanding the respect of all. Their lives make them great not merely their precepts. Precepts we have in galore; books we have in abundance; instructors we have in plenty; but like the flame alone that lights another light, so it is the life alone that influences, modulates and transforms another life.

The Holy Mother did not lecture, nor give discourses. But what has come down to us as her precepts, has been a collection from the diaries of disciples, instructions given by her to them who were genuine seekers, and will have a direct bearing on the life of the aspirants since they too may find themselves identically placed. They have an intimate connection with life as it is lived by the common people. Yet therein is embedded a profundity of thought that shall dazzle the imagination of the staunchest intellectual.

### ***How to obtain peace of mind***

Let us take first her last exhortation. She said, 'If you want peace of mind, do not find



fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; this whole world is your own!' How many times have we not read this! How many times have we not talked of it to others! But have we understood the implications of this teaching in full. In this epitome is a grand essay which can unfurl the sails of our boat of life, regulate its direction, and at last land us safe in the haven of rest. This exhortation seems to be so simple, but let us try to put it into practice, then we shall understand how difficult it is! It is a job for a life-time. Nay, it may require several lifetimes.

Now, what is it that makes us find fault? First of all it is jealousy. Most people cannot suffer the affluence of others. They cannot bear to see anyone rising head and shoulders above themselves in any sphere of life, be it learning, wealth, activity or others. They try to pull him down to their level and in order to do that they try to pick holes in the other's armour, spread even false rumours. Man stoops to any means to bring discredit to a neighbour who is rising in the eyes of the people.

Secondly it is vanity that compels us to find fault. We have so many vanities. Vanities of health, wealth, learning, purity, piety, and a host of others. One possessing any one of these is likely to look down upon another less fortunate soul. He must find fault, otherwise how could he rise in the estimation of people. But the really pure and pious never look down upon anyone. It is the vain alone that try to make capital out of others' shortcomings.

Thirdly hatred and spite play a great part in finding faults, hatred for some wrong done, or imagined to have been done and the natural desire to wreak vengeance. Lastly there is the habit of fault-finding itself which if not rooted out at the very outset will grow into a banyan tree impossible of being destroyed afterwards. Therefore when one seeks to find fault with others one must understand that one has, one or the other of these defects in oneself. Mother therefore says: 'See your own faults.' She means more than that. The moment our mind thinks of another's defect we leave our mind open to its influence. Unconsciously we harp on that subject and the mind gets clouded with that idea. Let us illustrate it by a parable of Sri Ramakrishna: 'There was once a Sannyasin, a holy man, who sat under a tree and taught the people. He drank milk and ate only fruit, and made endless "Pranayamas," and felt himself to be very holy. In the same village lived an evil woman. Everyday the Sannyasin went and warned her that her wickedness would lead her to hell. The woman, unable to change her method of life which was her only means of livelihood, was still much moved by the terrible future depicted by the Sannyasin. She wept and prayed to the Lord, begging Him to forgive her because she could not help herself. By and by both the holy man and the evil woman died. The angels came and bore her to heaven, while the demons claimed the soul of the Sannyasin. "Why is this!" he exclaimed, "have I not lived a most holy life, and preached holiness to everybody? Why should I be taken to hell while this wicked woman is taken to heaven? " "Because," answered the demons, "while she was forced to commit unholy acts, her mind was always fixed on the Lord and she sought deliverance, which has now come to her. But you, on the contrary, while you performed only holy acts, had your mind always fixed on the wickedness of others. You saw only sin, and thought only of sin, so now you have to go to that place where only sin is."'<sup>1</sup> There is a tendency today to take these tales and parables lightly as mere fanciful stories. But if we do so, without understanding the moral intended to be conveyed by them, we do it at a great risk to our spiritual well-being.

Again, the psychologists are of the opinion that most of our impressions are coloured by the taints of our own minds. In their language, they tend to be subjective. To a great extent this seems to be correct. A story is told that once Duryodhana set out to find a virtuous man; travelling through all the known lands of the time he could not find a single good man. Dharmaraja, on the other hand, sought to find a wicked person but returned sadly disappointed. One who is virtuous finds virtue everywhere and one who is wicked sees wickedness everywhere.



There is a psychological angle also, from which we can view at this teaching. Patanjali, the great Indian psychologist, says that yoga (the way to union with God) is restraining all the modifications of the mind-stuff.<sup>2</sup> In other words it means to steady the mind like the flame of a lamp in a windless place; to calm the mind like the waters of a still lake. All teachers are agreed on this point that unless the mind is stilled there can be no clear vision of the Ultimate Reality. As it is, the very fact of our embodiment implies that we have come to work out some of the effects of our actions in the past incarnations. And these being somewhat good we have been born as human beings. So all the efforts should be directed to calm the mind and reach the goal. If, on the other hand, we are every moment of our wakeful existence throwing the mind into convulsions by thinking about the defects in others when will the mind be steadied? Rather it will add to our bad tendencies and sow the seeds for further involvement into this world.

There are two sides to this teaching: the prohibitive and the injunctive. 'Seeing our own faults' leads us to correct ourselves. It should not be construed to mean that we should brood over our sins. The Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna were strongly against such a negative attitude. They used to say that one who says constantly that he is a sinner, becomes a veritable sinner. The attitude they encouraged was: 'I have perpetrated many sins, but I shall commit them no more. Lord help me to perfect myself.' This is a positive approach to life.

Further, forgiveness and forbearance have more value than all remonstrations. The great ones were ever forgiving even to the most sinful. Jesus did not hesitate in accepting the loving services of a fallen woman who was penitent. He blessed her and absolved her of her sins.<sup>3</sup> Buddha did not have any scruples to take his food in the house of a courtesan when it was offered with love, adoration, and faith. The life of the Holy Mother too bears testimony to several such incidents. Once, at Dakshineswar, while taking food to Sri Ramakrishna, a woman, of not pure character, requested the Holy Mother to grant her the privilege of carrying the food to the Master that day. Mother, though she knew about the character of the lady, handed over to her the plate of food. But later coming to the Master's room she found him sitting before the plate unable to partake anything of it. Mother understood the cause but appealed to him to somehow take the food that day. At this, Sri Ramakrishna asked the Mother to give her word that she would not send his food through anyone else in future. She replied, 'No, I cannot promise that; for if anyone wants something of me, I feel I must grant it. But anyway I shall try my best to carry your food myself.'

Another time Golap-Ma, a woman devotee, was scolding a maid-servant. When the Holy Mother asked her the reason for it, she said in a pique, 'What is the good of telling you, Mother? You cannot see the defects of others.' And what was the Mother's reply? 'Well Golap, there is no dearth of people to see faults of others. The world will not come to a standstill if I am otherwise.' That was the Holy Mother. Every one was her own child and like a mother, she could not see the faults of her children. Nay, for a mother even the faults of her children are its ornaments. And these great ones could transmute those faults into merits. Swami Vivekananda in a hymn to Sri Ramakrishna sang, 'O Lord, Thou dispeller of illusion, Thy name, pure and auspicious, convertest sinfulness to purity.' Was it mere poetry? He observed the Master closely for more than five years and saw for himself many lives being thus converted. Later, even after the Master's passing away, he saw that merely the Master's name did this work of conversion; wondering at this phenomenon did he then spontaneously burst out into this strain.

A question may now be posed: how will then people come to know of their defects if they are not pointed out to them, since the majority of people are under the impression that what they are doing is right? This question can be answered if two conditions are fulfilled. First of all, we must obtain the light for ourselves before bringing it to others, as Sri Ramakrishna used to say. Secondly we must ask ourselves whether we really, from the heart



of our hearts, wish the well-being of the object of our criticism? Do we love him? If we get an affirmative answer for these questions then only we need take the trouble of pointing others' defects. Otherwise we will only, as already stated, increase our load of karma, add to our burden. Again it may be noted that the Holy Mother was not alone in stipulating this prohibition. Christ said: 'Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?'<sup>4</sup> Swami Vivekananda was categorical when he said, 'you cannot reform by condemnation.' Sri Ramakrishna saluted even the street-walker as the image of the Divine Mother. Many such instances can we come across if we look into the lives of other great teachers also.

How then to get rid of this disease of fault-finding? Remove the causes, says the physician, and the disease must leave. All these causes, such as jealousy, hatred, vanity should be washed off our minds. These wicked thoughts can be counteracted only by cultivating the opposite good thoughts such as love, sympathy and humility,<sup>5</sup> says Patanjali. When jealousy arises in the mind curb it down by love, that is why the Holy Mother says: 'Learn to make the whole world your own.' These ideas of jealousy, hatred and the like are there because we think ourselves as separate from one another. 'Wherever you find duality there these ideas of seeing, etc., are bound to be,'<sup>6</sup> says the Brhadaranyakopanisad. And in another place the same Upanisad says, 'As long as we see a second so long is there fear.'<sup>7</sup> Unless we try to find unity, 'learn to make the world our own', these differences will be there. There are two ways of attaining unity or getting together. First is to recognize and feel that we are one big family, of which God is the father. Second is to realize or at least firmly be convinced that we are sparks of the same divinity or better still to accept that the Divine Being alone manifests in so many forms. All our Upanisads help us to attain such a conviction, such knowledge. The Katha Upanisad describes: 'As the one fire entering into the world shines in so many forms, so also this One, the Indwelling Spirit of all beings, resides in the hearts of all and yet is outside them all.'<sup>8</sup> It is Brahman alone that has become everything. When this knowledge is put into practice we are 'learning to make the world our own.' And when we attain perfection in this knowledge, 'when one sees all beings in oneself and oneself in all beings, then one does not feel aversion for anything.'<sup>9</sup> This is the acme of spiritual realization and this alone can bring us everlasting peace. This is the goal and in this realization alone the meaning of the words of the Holy Mother 'none is a stranger my child, this world is your own,' is fulfilled.

### ***Religion and worldly afflictions***

The Holy Mother said to a disciple: 'It is not a fact that you will never face dangers. Difficulties always come but they do not last for ever. They pass away like water under a bridge.' This is possibly an answer to the problem that faces man. The puzzle how to get rid of dangers and difficulties: dangers such as old age, disease and death, difficulties such as poverty, bereavements and the like.

Man tries all other methods of overcoming them and then thinks God may help him. We see large concourse of people in temples, synagogues, and churches. Not all who go to these places want or seek God. Most of them want everything else but God. Some want wealth, others want their diseases to be cured and still others would want something else. Very few really and truly want God for His own sake. Sri Krishna has very aptly analysed these types of devotees in the Gita: 'Four types of people worship Me: the afflicted, the seeker, those with desires, and the wise. All these are good people. But the wise alone truly loves me. He is My own self.'<sup>10</sup> Remembering God in any way does good. But one should not think, that because one has turned religious, because one believes in God, all one's difficulties will be removed and it will be a smooth sailing afterwards, that one will lead a



happy life. Not at all. For what is life? It is existence. And existence can only be felt in a body. Body is a material thing, a combination of the five elements: space, air, water, fire and earth. Being a combination the body is subject to changes like growth, decay and death. All these changes are not pleasant. Again the same sensations may be pleasant today and unbearably pain-giving tomorrow. Take some common examples: On a hot day a cold bath will be very welcome but the same cold bath on a wintry night will be most undesirable. A good dish, when the body is in a healthy condition is beneficial to its growth but when it is in a diseased state the very same dish acts as poison. So also with all our enjoyments and miseries. They have origin and disappearance, and last only for a small duration of time. We have therefore to endure them, says Sri Krishna.<sup>11</sup> That is what the Holy Mother reiterates when she says, 'they do not last for ever.' It all goes to prove that as long as the body lasts pain and pleasure must be suffered. They are like the shadow of the body. You cannot jump away from the shadow. So an eternal happy life is a contradiction in terms like cold fire or hot ice. It may be a wonderful imagery as an ending to a fairy tale but in the sordid reality it has no place. This the Holy Mother wants us to know thoroughly and unmistakably.

What then is the use of taking to religion if it is not able to take us across the ocean of grief? The answer is, it cannot give you any temporary relief. For this there are other methods, in disease there are the medicines to cure, in poverty there is the charitable man to assist. One comes to religion when one wants the complete cessation of the miseries of the world. He does not expect that taking to religion he will be freed from all bodily discomforts. To him the body remains only as the instrument to cross over to the other shores of this samsara. He comes to know of his own Self, the Atman, and like the bridge, allows miseries and enjoyments to pass under him but not to overwhelm him. Sri Ramakrishna cites the instance of the Pandava brothers as exemplars of true spiritual aspirants remaining unmoved and undeterred, in spite of all calamities. He describes, 'They did not lose their God-consciousness even once. Where can you find men like them, endowed with so much knowledge and devotion?' The Holy Mother too is insistent to drive home the point that religion is not the gateway to physical enjoyment nor it is the opium of the intellectuals; it is hard work but the fruit is true and solid as none other is.

Nothing outwardly changes in the holy man, he appears to suffer from bodily ailments like any ordinary person, but with this difference that while the latter grieves over the body and its afflictions, the former is indifferent to them. Again the holy man is not afraid of death. For him even the direst calamity is a messenger from the beloved. Ramaprasad, a great poet devotee of Bengal, realizing God as Divine Mother sang:

‘I have surrendered my soul at the fearless  
feet of the Mother,  
Am I afraid of Death any more?’

and in the last line of the same song he says, 'Ready am I uttering "Victory to Durga" for the life's last journey.' By realizing God one goes beyond pain and pleasure which in reality are only of the body; the body consciousness is overcome.

### ***God-realization the aim of life***

‘To realize God and to remain immersed in His contemplation is the aim of human life,’ said the Holy Mother when she was asked as to what the aim of life was. God for many is an unknown entity, whereas the world is very tangible, very real. The mind is drawn to this world easily and naturally. How to direct this mind from the known world to the unknown God? And why should we do it? Because knowing the world we remain in the world but



knowing God, realizing Him, we get out of it. Again the known world is elusive, deceptive and destructive. Observe the world, the boy of today grows into the youth of tomorrow and with his flaming youthful imagination what exquisite ideas of life does he not form! What vistas of vision does he not see! Everything is brilliant and everything is glorious before him. He stretches both his hands to gather those enchanting things. But before he is aware, before he has enjoyed his fill, before he has fulfilled his ambitions the noonday of youth is past; the slanting rays of the waning sun of youth have already hit his life. Soon the darkness of decrepitude and old age are on him. He cries for light, but wherefrom should he get it? He had strayed away from the path of light and preferred darkness. Soon he hears the hoarse laughter of approaching death. At this man trembles like an aspen leaf. He thinks: Is this all? What have I gained? Is this the end of all my planning? Where have gone all those which I considered as my own? There they were till now. Yes, life passes away like a wink of the eye; the life-span of man compared to the endless time is a drop in the ocean. All, man considered as his, he has to leave behind at the call of death. The world thus successfully enchants, eludes, deceives and destroys man. Naciketa, though a boy, saw through the game of this world and would not be caught into its net. Boldly, therefore, does he say to Yama, ‘O lord of death, these things you offer, viz., divine damsels, chariots, long life and wealth are of dubious value. Moreover they sap away the energy of the senses. Even the longest life that you can offer is naught compared to the eternity of time. Therefore keep these things to yourself.’<sup>12</sup> Naciketa further adds, ‘Tell me what happens to man after death — the subject about which there is so much controversy but to know about which is imperative. Apart from this secret knowledge, Naciketa does not desire anything.’<sup>13</sup> Here is the discrimination which the Holy Mother asked her disciples to practise so that they could realize God.

### ***Japa and concentration of mind***

Once an attendant was reading to the Holy Mother some of the letters written by the disciples. Many of them were complaints that they could not concentrate the mind. After some time she said in a rather animated voice, ‘The mind will be steadied if one repeats the Name of God fifteen or twenty thousand times a day. It is truly so. I myself have experienced it. Let them practise it first; if they fail, let them complain. One should practise Japa with some devotion, but this is not done. They will not do anything, they will only complain, saying, "Why do I not succeed."’ Many of the religious seekers give up religion and turn agnostic when they find that a little effort does not help them to realize God. Realization is a far cry, if we but get a little real taste for the Name of God we would be blessed. But it is also true that the dawn of the day of God-vision is not far when once man has cultivated an intensive love for God. Even for getting this taste, concentration of the mind is imperative. And there is no other way to it than by intense practice. The words of the Holy Mother in this regard ring with the voice of authority as she herself spent almost the whole of her life in regular and continuous spiritual practices. The religious life therefore is not escapism as is thought of in some quarters nor is it meant for the weak. Here one is reminded of another exhortation of the Holy Mother, ‘Youth is the time when intense efforts are to be made for realization of God!’ The call comes to us like those of the ancient Rishis. Let us heed the voice and make our lives worthy.

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<sup>1</sup> Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. VIII, Pages 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> Yoga sutras 1.2.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. St. Luke 7. 37-50.

<sup>4</sup> St. Luke 6.41.

<sup>5</sup> Yoga sutras 2-33.

<sup>6</sup> 2.4.14.



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<sup>7</sup> 1.4.2.

<sup>8</sup> 5-9.

<sup>9</sup> Isa Up. 6.

<sup>10</sup> 7.16; 7.18.

<sup>11</sup> Gita 2.14.

<sup>12</sup> Kathopanishad 1.26.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1.29.



**By Swami Paratparananda**

\* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – Jan 1963; Vol. 50; page 362

India has been the perennial source of religious revival for millenniums now. This source has been augmented, replenished and reinforced from time to time by a succession of sages and seers through the ages. This life-giving stream of religion has never been allowed to dry up during its meandering course through the dreary desert of this world. Its course might have been obstructed, checked or seriously hampered but was never lost; on such occasions it gathered momentum to flow with greater vigour and to reach far-off lands. Each sage was, as it were, a tributary emptying itself into the main stream, with this difference that each originated at and was nourished by the same spring, the Eternal Religion (*Sanâtana Dharma*). Each one left one more edifice, one more haven for the scorched humanity to rest its limbs on its onward march to God.

Beginning from the Vedic period down to the present century we see waves of spirituality passing over the country; each one guiding humanity and rescuing it from foundering on the rock of dogmatism and sophistry, from unbelief and unrighteousness, at the same time catering to the particular need of the age. When such a nadir was reached in the last century a powerful wave arose and on the crest of it was Sri Ramakrishna. His was a very short span of life but intensely spiritual. After a long period of extensive sadhana and realizations he collected round him a few young and energetic youths, picked and chosen to be his torch-bearers and banded them together into a brotherhood before he left his mortal coil. He named Narendranath, who later become the world-renowned Swami Vivekananda, to be the leader of the brotherhood and commanded him to minister to the spiritual needs of humanity, much against Narendranath's own inclination for a quiet and meditative life. Sri Ramakrishna specially trained him for this purpose.

### ***Sri Ramakrishna's training of Narendranath in Vedanta***

Sri Ramakrishna's power to see through the past, present and future of an aspirant who came to him, and also his visions regarding Narendranath, had revealed to him who Naren was and what was his mission on the earth. He verified these visions and conclusions on Naren's third visit to Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna on that occasion took him to the adjacent garden of Jadu Mallik and in the course of conversation entered into a trance. In this state the Master touched Narendra. Narendra, in spite of his best efforts to remain unaffected by the touch, instantly lost all out-ward consciousness, as on the previous occasion. Sri Ramakrishna put him several questions when he was in that condition and learnt many things which confirmed his visions and findings about Naren's antecedents. Then onwards Sri Ramakrishna started training him in the path of Advaitic knowledge. But Narendra was not to submit easily. His inquiring and analytical intellect could not accept anything as true unless he experienced it himself or it stood the test of reason. So when the Master requested him — with a view to familiarise him — to read aloud some passages from such Advaitic



treatises as the *Ashtavakra Samhita*, he revolted saying, 'It is blasphemous, for there is no difference between such philosophy and atheism. There is no greater sin in the world than to think myself identical with the Creator. . . The sages who wrote such things must have been insane.' Sri Ramakrishna was amused at this outspoken comment of his disciple. He argued with him that no one could place a limitation on God, that he should be such and such and not anything else, but to no purpose. Narendra continued to criticize such ideas for some time more. One day Sri Ramakrishna, having failed to convince his disciple by argument about the truth of Advaitic realizations, touched him in an ecstatic mood. There was an immediate change in the disciple's vision. He saw with his eyes open that there was nothing else in the universe but God. He kept his vision to himself to see how long it would last. When he went home and sat for food he saw that the plate, the food, the server, all was God; on the streets the cab, the horse and himself, he found were made of the same stuff. This experience continued for some days and with it came to him the conviction about the truths of Advaita philosophy, which no amount of argument could have been able to bring. That was the mode of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching.

Sri Ramakrishna was, however, careful to enlarge the disciple's vision regarding other faiths and paths. Even the path considered most indecent and vulgar, Sri Ramakrishna said, was a path if there was a real and intense longing for God. One day while Narendra was condemning certain practices of some sects Sri Ramakrishna gently told him, 'My boy, a mansion has many entrances. Some of them no doubt are dirty like the scavenger's entrance to a house. It is really desirable to enter the house by the front door.' Naren thereafter was never seen to condemn any sect. By these gentle methods Sri Ramakrishna helped to wipe out bigotry and puritanism from the disciple's mind.

It was never the procedure with Sri Ramakrishna to force his own views on the disciples. He allowed them to grow naturally, helping them in their own path. Naren once felt it difficult to go beyond the body idea and approached the Master for the remedy. How the Master helped Naren to overcome this impediment we shall learn from Narendranath himself: 'On another occasion I felt great difficulty in totally forgetting my body during meditation and concentrating the mind wholly on the ideal. I went to him for counsel, and he gave me the very instruction which he himself had received from Totapuri while practising Samadhi at the time of his Vedantic Sadhana. He sharply pressed between my two eyebrows with his finger nail and said, "Now concentrate your mind on this painful sen-sation!" As a result I found I could concentrate easily on that sensation as long as I liked, and during that period I completely forgot the consciousness of the other parts of my body, not to speak of their causing any distraction in the way of my meditation.'

Narendra with his keen intellect, weighed the Master's words in a balance, as it were, criticized and tested them before accepting them. At the same time he could go deep into their meaning. We shall narrate a solitary instance which has a pertinent bearing on our theme. One day Sri Ramakrishna was discussing the tenets of the Vaishnavas. He recounted them to his devotees: relish for the name of God, compassion for all living creatures and service to the devotees of God. He related at some length what the meaning of the first tenet was, but coming to speak about compassion he was thrown into Samadhi. Returning to a semi-conscious state he said to himself, 'Compassion to creatures! Compassion to creatures! Thou fool. An insignificant worm crawling on earth, thou to show compassion to others! Who art thou to show compassion! No it cannot be. It is not compassion for others but rather service to man, recognising him to be the veritable manifestation of God.'

Coming out of the room, Naren said to his young friends, 'I have discovered a



strange light in those wonderful words of the Master. How beautifully has he reconciled the ideal of Bhakti with the knowledge of the Vedanta, generally interpreted as hard, austere and inimical to human sentiments and emotions! What a grand, natural and sweet synthesis! For a long time did he explain the meaning of those words and in the end said, 'If it is the will of God, the day will soon come when I shall proclaim this grand truth before the world at large. I shall make it the common property of all'. Thus did the Master prepare his disciple for the propagation of Vedanta.

### *Contact with the masses of India*

For a time after the Master's passing away, outwardly it appeared as if all was over; but the seed of renunciation sown by the Master and the hankering for God-realization, that he had generated in the young hearts, were too enduring to be easily lost in the maze of the world. A monastery soon came into being, though in a dilapidated house, at Baranagore with the kind munificence of Surendranath Mitra, an ardent devotee of the Master. The young men gathered there plunged themselves in spiritual practices and scriptural studies. Days and months passed in this way. The fire of vairagya kindled by the Master kept on burning steadily and unabated, and Narendranath played a great part in this process. He engaged them in talks of the days they had spent with the Master, revivifying their memories with the ecstatic joy of those days and urging them on in their spiritual practices, even though he himself was passing through a tornado of difficulties at his own home. When he had settled the affairs of the family at home and put the monastery in a shape, the urge to wander alone, depending solely on God, came upon him.

During his peregrinations he came in contact with the real India; India of the villages, the pure, simple, innocent folk, industrious yet grovelling in poverty, living in dirt and squalor, bearing their hard lot with a patience that was beyond imagination. This naked picture of penury and illiteracy pained him deeply, and stirred the very depths of his being. A stern resolve to do something to alleviate their misery goaded him from place to place. Having failed to rouse the sympathy of the rich of the country in their cause, he thought of seeking it elsewhere. Just at this time he heard of the Parliament of Religions that was being convened at Chicago and thought it the best medium through which he could approach and rouse the interest of the people of America in the masses of India. With the aid of a few friends he crossed over to America.

### *The Parliament of Religions and after*

What transpired at the Parliament of Religions is an event well-known to all and needs no repetition here. Suffice it to say that, whatever may have been the motive of the convenors of the Parliament, it was undoubtedly established that Hinduism was in no respect inferior to any other religion; rather it was found to be the only religion which had from the earliest times showed toleration and acceptance of other religions. And that not in a patronising attitude, but as a true recognition of the different pathways to God. Who then was more competent to represent Hinduism than Swami Vivekananda, the disciple of a person who was, as it were, a Parliament of Religions in session, viz. Sri Ramakrishna? Nay,



Sri Ramakrishna was a harmonious blend of them all. Was not Swami Vivekananda trained by the Master to look on all faiths as pathways to God? In Sri Ramakrishna he had seen no note of discord. Every type of aspirant came, discussed his religion, his difficulties, was enlightened and went with his vision broadened. The chosen disciple of the Master, Swami Vivekananda, was, therefore, pre-eminently fitted to appear and speak at that august assembly in the name of the 'mother of all religions'. And he did receive the acclamation and admiration of that cultured gathering when he addressed it. Over-night he became famous. Swami Vivekananda became, to quote one of their papers, a celebrity.

After the Parliament of Religions he toured the States of America from one end to the other, spreading the message of Vedanta, enlightening the people on the customs, manners and religion of the Hindus, a race maligned without cause. A race whose only faults, if any, were that it was not aggressive and intolerant; that it never went to conquer or proselytise with the sword. Swami Vivekananda had to fight against the ignominious propaganda of his adversaries. A heart less pure and brave than that of Swamiji would have compromised or would have broken down in the face of such attacks. Swami Vivekananda stood like a rock while the calumniators beat themselves against it and were crushed. 'Truth will triumph,' was his calm and collected reply to those who wanted him to defend himself. And before long truth did triumph. This is how Swami Vivekananda suffered for the sake of India, Hinduism and the masses.

### *Application of Vedanta in practice*

Now let us see why Swami Vivekananda, a monk that he was, took upon himself the so-called work of social regeneration, a work purely for the society to deal with. There were two reasons. First of all, the society was comatose and moribund. The English-educated of the society were turning to the West for enlightenment and aping them in their customs and costumes. They had lost faith in all that was native to the soil. What was left of such a society were some village superstitions and rigid caste rules. Could any good be expected out of such a society? Were then the poor and the downtrodden to be left to the mercy of such an unsympathetic society? Did not the Master enjoin them to serve man as a veritable manifestation of God? And when so many gods were trampled under the heels of autocracy and ground in the wheel of poverty, was he to keep quiet? How then would he be true to Sri Ramakrishna's teaching? What does even Vedanta teach? Do not the Upanisads declare, 'Verily all this is Brahman' <sup>1</sup>, 'That Thou art' <sup>2</sup>? Were these highest truths of Vedanta then to remain only in books or as subjects for intellectual discussions? Swamiji never believed in such sophisticated statements as: this is philosophy and that is practice. To him religion was a practical science. It was his firm faith that the truths of Vedanta could be lived and should be lived. For, he had seen one, Sri Ramakrishna, who was the living embodiment of Vedanta philosophy. Enlightened, therefore, by the Master's interpretation of Vedanta and urged by his own noble heart, Swami Vivekananda strived to mitigate the misery of the poor. To the still doubting minds we like to recall Sri Ramakrishna's remonstrance of young Naren's cherishing the idea to work for individual salvation alone. Did not the Master express what he expected of him, in clear and unambiguous terms, when he said, 'I expect you to be like the banyan tree under which the weary travellers could rest'? What further testimony than this is necessary to show that it was Sri Ramakrishna's own will which was working through the Swami?

Again, uplifting of the masses may be social work in the eyes of those whose vistas



of vision are cramped by mere body idea, who see man only as a higher species of animal, a bundle of flesh. But for him they were divinities on earth. Let us see what Swami Vivekananda says of service to the poor and the stricken: 'The poor and the miserable are for our salvation so that we may serve the Lord coming in the shape of the diseased, coming in the shape of the lunatic, the leper and the sinner.' Besides there was the command by the Master to preach religion. To whom was he to preach it? To the hungry millions? There could be no mockery baser than that and he knew it well. So he said, 'Let the hungry get a morsel of food.' Who could fathom the anguish of that heart that bled for the poor of the country? He wanted to make Vedanta most practical. 'If you believed in a thing and did not try to practise it,' he said, 'why, that is hypocrisy, it is worse than atheism. At least the atheist is honest.' Swami Vivekananda was, therefore, moved to take up the regeneration of the masses not on humanitarian grounds, as some like to interpret it, but as a worship of the divine, the indwelling spirit, the essence of all beings.

### *Vedanta disabused*

It is commonly believed that for the practice of Vedanta one has to divest oneself of all the tender feelings and sentiments of the heart. We do not know what led to this peculiar idea, but it is perfectly contrary to what has been recorded in history. Take for instance the life of Sri Sankara, the paragon of Vedanta philosophy in the past. If this was the ideal, why did he not confine himself to his own salvation? What made him wander on foot from one end of the country to the other? What axe of his own had he to grind? One has to admit that there was no other cause for him to do so except for the establishment of religion, a way of life that could give ultimate liberation. What higher compassion can there be than to feel for the liberation of the ignorant? The impression, that one had to be unfeeling, seems therefore to be based on insufficient grounds. Whatever might have been its origin and whatever might have been its necessity in the past, if there was any — about which we have grave doubts — in the present age this opinion has forfeited its right to exist. Swami Vivekananda was the first, in recent times, to disabuse Vedanta of this ill-fame.

Let us see for ourselves if this contention — Vedanta teaches one to be sympathetic — is at variance with the scriptures: What is the ultimate goal of Vedanta? Realizing one's own Self which is Brahman,<sup>3</sup> Brahman which is the only Truth. 'This Universe is only Brahman,'<sup>4</sup> and It is 'One without a second,'<sup>5</sup> declare our Upanisads. Vedanta then teaches the Oneness of Reality. It also says, 'Perceive it through the mind that there are not many things at all, one who sees many goes from death to death.'<sup>6</sup> Again take the famous passage of Svetasvatara Upanisad, 'Thou art the woman, Thou art the man, Thou art the boy, Thou art the girl. Thou art the old man tottering on the stick, Thou art that which manifests in so many shapes.'<sup>7</sup> What religion expresses the divinity of all beings in such clear terms? Vedanta, therefore, does not teach us to turn into stock and stone.

This Oneness, that it teaches, alone makes for love; unless one recognises, at least intellectually in the beginning, the Oneness of all creatures, Vedanta is impossible of practice. And to attain this love, our feelings, our heart only can help us. Speaking on practical Vedanta, Swamiji stresses: 'It is through the heart that the Lord is seen and not through the intellect. The intellect is only the street cleaner, cleansing the path for us, a secondary worker, a policeman; but the policeman is not a positive necessity for the working of society. He is only to stop disturbances, to check wrong doing and that is all the work required of the intellect. . . . It is feeling that works, that moves with speed infinitely superior



to that of Electricity or anything else. Do you feel? If you do, you will see the Lord. . . . It is the feeling that is the life, the strength, the vitality, without which no amount of intellectual activity can reach God.' Again he says, 'Intellect is like limbs without power of locomotion. It is only when feeling enters and gives them motion that they move and work on others.' Swamiji, therefore, here restates the Vedantic standpoint, only more effectively as he had direct access to such realizations.

### *Vedanta, basis of all Ethics*

Another charge levelled against Hinduism in general by some Western writers is 'that it is quite impossible to find any real or vital principle of ethics,' in Vedic literature. This is not a fact, because the Vedic literature, from which we cannot exclude the Upanisads, is replete with texts which enunciate the ethical principles, based on which alone Manu and other sages have given out their law codes. This, the writers have conveniently overlooked and put out statements which are biased and presumptuous. If, on the other hand, this statement had any truth in it, how does one account for the emergence of so many saints and sages in the country? Can truth come out of falsehood? Can sin beget holiness? If at all any *sure* basis exists for ethics, it is only in Vedanta which teaches the Oneness of all life, all existence. Let us see what Swami Vivekananda says on the subject: 'The rational West is earnestly bent upon seeking out the rationality, the *raison d'être* of all its philosophy and ethics; and you all know well that ethics cannot be derived from the mere sanction of any personage, however great and divine he may have been. Such an explanation of the authority of ethics appeals no more to the highest of the world's thinkers; they want something more than human sanction for ethical and moral codes to be binding, they want some eternal principle of truth as the sanction of ethics. And where is that eternal sanction to be found except in the only Infinite Reality, that exists in you and in me and in all, in the Self, in the Soul? The infinite oneness of the Soul is the eternal sanction of all morality, that you and I are not only brothers, but that you and I are really one. This is the dictate of Indian philosophy. This oneness is the rationale of all ethics and all spirituality.' Repeatedly did he bring this fact to the notice of his audience. On one occasion he said, 'Why is it that every one says, "Do good to others"? Where is the explanation? Why is it that all great men have preached the brotherhood of mankind, and greater men the brotherhood of all lives? Because whether they were conscious of it or not, behind all that, through all their irrational and personal superstitions, was peering forth the eternal light of the Self denying all manifoldness, and asserting that the whole universe is but One.' Therefore the cause of Hinduism and Vedanta in this respect stands vindicated as anyone can see.

All these truths, however, were garbled and presented to the West by parties who wanted to advance their own cause in India. Hence it was required that a true picture of Indian Religion be presented not in mere word-pictures but in life. Swami Vivekananda by his immaculate life, wonderful realizations and great insight fulfilled the purpose. It was from that day that the queer ideas the West cherished about India began to disappear and Vedanta reached a wider circle. India, and for the matter of that the whole world, remains eternally grateful to the Swami.

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<sup>1</sup> Chandogya Up., III.14.1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., VI.8.7.

<sup>3</sup> Brihadaranyaka Up., II.5.19.



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<sup>4</sup> Mundaka Up., 2.2.12.

<sup>5</sup> Chandogya Up., VI.2.1.

<sup>6</sup> Katha Up., 4.11.

<sup>7</sup> 4.3.



**By Swami Paratparananda**

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This is an age of science when people doubt the very veracity of the existence of God. Though advanced scientists are not so dogmatic in their views now, most people think that matter is quite sufficient for the existence of the universe. Science provides them with their requirements of trade, transport, luxury and other things. By researches in the hygienic field science has been able to extend the lease of man's life. A long and happy life is what most people desire, and for that they have the science and its methods. Where then is there the necessity for a God, whom none can see even by travelling in the space capsules? He is not visible to our eyes, nor perceived by our senses; how then can a sense-bound man believe in Him? So he denies Him outright.

Some others do not go so far, they think, 'Let Him be if He exists; He can neither do good nor evil to us, so we have no necessity of Him. We need not bother about Him.' Still others oscillate between belief and unbelief. They sometimes are very hopeful and certain that He is; and that is when everything goes on in their favour, to their liking, but at other times when they are thwarted in their desires, their belief snaps like a worn out string. Most of the believers are of this latter type. It is not bad either. For, it is better than rank materialism. But one should not stop with this belief. Religion should not end in mere lip service, rituals, or seeking utility. Swami Vivekananda used to say, 'It is good to be born in a church but not to die in it'. Man is not man unless he evolves into spiritual manhood. Others are mere babies who are satisfied with the tinsels of this world. They are happy with these 'red toys'. Unless they are tired of these little plays they will not listen. In the language of Sri Ramakrishna they have scored three, four or five points and are still in the game. In short the ordinary run of men, even if they be scholars, are only matter-conscious.

Very rare are the souls who desire to be God-conscious; who hunger for God. Sri Krishna voices the same opinion in the Gita, 'One among thousands tries for perfection and some one among those who try, know Me truly, in the proper perspective.'<sup>1</sup> Sri Ramakrishna used to remark often with great pathos, 'Who wants God? People shed jugful of tears for wife, children, property and wealth; but who weeps for God?'

Nature in the physical world has a way of adjusting itself. A depression at a certain place in the atmosphere, due to extreme heat, immediately sets in a gale, a storm. It is the nature's way of infilling the want. A similar phenomenon we notice in the life of man. He is terribly afraid of the upset of balance of power, and struggles hard to maintain it; for upon it depends his physical existence. All the conflicts that we see in the world today are due to this fear of upset of balance. Now what happens in the physical world, may also be attributed to be repeating in the spiritual world. So when agnosticism reached its peak, hit the ceiling, as it were, and the balance was disturbed in the spiritual atmosphere, some one was necessary who could restore the balance; who could demonstrate that matter alone without the spirit behind it, was powerless like the body without life; who could show that God was the essential unit of all existence, that God was a verifiable truth and not the mere fancy of fevered brains.

Sri Ramakrishna came to us to point out that. He was the embodiment of



God-consciousness. When we review the events of his life we find that one thread of Super-Consciousness running all through them without a break. His birth itself seems to indicate this characteristic in him. Let us recall the event. The baby was born. The woman attending on the mother after sometime turned round to look for the baby. But it was not where she left it. It had slid into the hollow fire-place nearby and was seen besmeared with ashes. Yet it uttered no cry. Was it a prelude to the child's future life of silent but intense renunciation? Observing the later events one is compelled to surmise that it is so. How does it indicate renunciation? The ashes for the Hindu have a two-fold significance. They are sacred to him as they are Lord Shiva's ornament. Adorned with it He is visualized as sitting absorbed in meditation on the Mount Kailas. Secondly it points to the ultimate end of man. What is left of man when he dies and is cremated, but a handful of ashes? All his ambitions, huge aspirations, ever recurring desires —none of these can hold him back from the mouth of death, nay they thrust him again and again into its mouth. That is what the Upanisad says, 'The other world (the Highest) does not shine for the child-minds (the indiscriminating), who are engrossed in worldly attachments, and are deluded by wealth; who deny the existence of a higher world, and believe that this is all that exists. Such people come under My (Death's) sway again and again.'<sup>2</sup> So one is asked to make an oblation of one's desires by lighting the fire of knowledge to be free from death, which means to be free from birth also. 'As a blazing fire reduces to ashes all wood that is put into it, the fire of knowledge burns away all activities,'<sup>3</sup> says the Gita. Here the child (Sri Ramakrishna) is, as if, immersed in his own Self unaware of the surroundings, displaying his unattachment to things worldly and his perfection from very birth.

Later, as a boy, his sport and pastime were in enacting the life incidents of Sri Krishna. The solitary mango grove of Manick Raja was the venue of these sports; with a few friends of his own age he retired to this place and re-enacted what he heard from the wandering minstrels and saw at the dramatic performances about these godly lives. Moulding the images of Gods and Goddesses and playing at their worship was his another play.

Another thing, which was conducive to his nature, was doing odd jobs for the wandering monks, who stayed at the village rest-house and listening to their talks on God. As days passed he took to wandering alone in the village cremation grounds and was seen to spend hours in solitude. This latter trait developed in him by degrees after his father's passing away. What visions he had and what revelations came to him none can say. His mind must have been in deep communion with nature and its Creator. For, he is seen after this to emerge with definite convictions regarding the way he would conduct himself in the world. One is reminded of the Upanisadic story of Satyakama Jabala, who lived in rapport with nature for several years and at the end of the period came to have the Highest knowledge, being taught by a bull, the fire, and the two birds. Sri Ramakrishna's exhortation even to his lay-disciples to go into solitude, at least occasionally, is of particular significance. He lived for years and years such a life and knew the value of it.

As early as the age of seven he had his soul's first flight into the Unknown. And how was it occasioned? One day when he was out in the fields with a handful of puffed rice, in a basket, his eyes fell on a flight of snow-white cranes across some sombre clouds; the contrast and picturesqueness of it so enveloped the boy that he lost all outward consciousness. He was carried in that condition to the house. Though the parents became anxious it was observed that the ecstasy had no adverse effect on the boy. The boy himself related later to his friends and parents, that he enjoyed a unique bliss within him at that time. Perhaps, for his pure mind, the beauty of the scene gave an inkling into the realms of the Beautiful; lifted the



veil from the face of the Reality, the Lord, who is described in the scriptures as Truth, Auspiciousness and Beauty. Even at this age his absorption in the contemplation of the Divine appears to be so complete that a little impetus would send him into deep ecstasy. Once the boy, Gadadhar (Sri Ramakrishna's early name), was accompanying some ladies of the village to Visalakshi temple at Anur, a village two miles to the north of Kamarpukur, singing the glories of the Goddess, when he suddenly became still. Tears began to flow from his eyes and all efforts of the ladies to bring him back to the normal state were of no avail, until at last a pious lady in the group suggested that they take the name of the Goddess. This had the desired effect. Another time it was when he played the part of Siva, in a dramatic performance on a Sivaratri night in his village, that he merged in the identity of Siva. With the matted-locks, the tiger skin, and the trident he looked so charming that the assemblage cheered him. But he was rapt up in the thought of God. Who would hear and who would act? He did not regain the normal state again that night, in spite of their best efforts.

The storm of God-consciousness that had seized Sri Ramakrishna and was blowing unabated in his boyhood increased in its strength and became a tornado when he entered the Kali Temple at Dakshineswar as Her priest. There She, the Divine Mother, was and he Her child was out to verify the truth of Her existence. He prayed to Her, entreated Her, wept, fasted and passed nights in calling upon Her to show Herself to him. What agony, what anguish he passed through we can never know. A little glimpse of it we can obtain from the description that he himself gave. He said, 'I felt as if someone was wringing my heart and mind, just as they do to squeeze out water from a wet towel.' Unable, at last, to bear the agony he wished to end his life. It was then that the Divine Mother gave him the first vision. What a vision it was! He felt as if he was being enveloped in the surging waves of an ocean of infinite light, and fell down unconscious.

Even after this vision Sri Ramakrishna's desire to be in Her immediate presence did not subside, rather it only increased. Like a child he wailed, calling upon the Divine Mother to bestow on him the boon of Her constant vision. He writhed and rolled on the ground in pain at being separated from Her. Hearing his wailing people would gather round him. But to him they were no more real than shadows or were at the most mere pictures drawn on canvas. In his extreme agony he would lose his external consciousness and in that state would be more than compensated by the blissful presence of the Divine Mother in his inner Self. At that time She consoled him and taught him in endless ways.

At one time, for six years at a stretch, he had no sleep. He could not wink his eyes. They had lost the power to do so, because of his extraordinary longing for the unbroken vision of the Divine Mother. Sri Ramakrishna himself was petrified at this phenomenon. To quote his own words: 'I could not close the eyes in spite of my efforts. I had no idea of the passage of time and was not at all conscious of the body. When the eyes turned from Mother to the body, even a little, I felt apprehensive, I asked myself, "Am I not on the verge of insanity?" I stood before the mirror and put my finger into my eyes to see whether the eyelids closed. I found they were incapable of winking even then; I became alarmed and wept and said to the Mother, "Mother, is this the result of calling on Thee? Is this the result of my absolute reliance on Thee that Thou hast given this terrible disease to this body". And the next moment I said, "Let anything happen to this. Let the body go if it is to do so; but see, Mother, You don't forsake me. Do reveal Thyself to me and bestow Thy grace on me."'

Perhaps the only near parallel to this kind of love for God we may find in the love of Gopis of Vrindavan for Sri Krishna. The Bhagavata says about them: 'Their hearts given to Him, they talked of Him alone; they imitated His sportful activities; they identified



themselves with Him; they sang of His excellent attributes; they did not think of their homes.’<sup>4</sup> Sri Krishna says of them to Uddhava: ‘Through deep longing for Me the thoughts of the Gopis were firmly fixed on Me and hence they were not conscious of their body, or what was far or near, just as sages absorbed in contemplation, or like the rivers that have entered the sea losing their distinguishing name and form.’<sup>5</sup>

We can learn a little more of Sri Ramakrishna’s inordinate love for God if we take one or two more incidents in his life. Once Sri Ramakrishna had been to Banaras, the holy city of the Hindus, with Mathur Babu, proprietor of the Kali Temple and a son-in-law of Rani Rasmani. Mathur was a man of the world and many types of people came to him and there would be talks on all sorts of subjects. To Sri Ramakrishna the atmosphere of the house became unbearable. He said to the Divine Mother in a complaining tone, ‘Mother, where have You brought me? I was much better off at Dakshineswar. Here I am in a place where I must hear about “woman and gold”. But at Dakshineswar I could avoid it.’

Again when devotees began to come to him in large numbers, he noticed that most of them were like one measure of milk mixed with three or four measures of water, so dilute, so luke-warm in their love towards God. He cried out in despair, ‘Mother, bring some pure-souled devotees. I shall die of the company of worldly people.’ Such was his condition. Even a little talk of anything else than God would pain him deeply. Narada in his Bhakti Sutras speaks of this attitude as *ananyata* or unification with God, which comes from the abandonment of all other support.<sup>6</sup> He speaks of such Bhakti as, ‘the consecration of all activities, by complete surrender to Him and extreme anguish if He were forgotten’<sup>7</sup> The Upanisads too speak in a similar strain. The Mundaka Upanisad says: ‘Know That one alone, the Atman; give up all other talk. This is the bridge to Immortality.’<sup>8</sup> What can we understand about all this? Try even for a single day to practise this injunction of the Upanisad and you will find how difficult it is; it appears almost impossible. But in the light of Sri Ramakrishna’s life, which stands as the unrefuted proof of the Upanisadic teachings, all these truths of the scriptures acquire a new meaning; they get a new lease of life as it were. That is why Swami Vivekananda said, ‘The life of Sri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion. He was the object-lesson of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Sastras. He showed by his life what the Rishis and Avatars really wanted to teach . . . Without studying Sri Ramakrishna first, one can never understand the real import of the Vedas, the Vedanta, of the Bhagavata and other Puranas.’

Regarding surrender which, is spoken of in the Bhakti Sastras, Sri Ramakrishna had an over abundance of it. His visions, the treasures of his unstinted practices and unsullied life, were doubted by Swami Vivekananda at the beginning. Sri Ramakrishna like a child approached the Divine Mother and asked in a pathetic way, ‘Mother, should you, finding me ignorant, befool me?’ But when the Mother assured him that his visions were all true and that Narendra would soon accept them, he was delighted. When Hazra, a devotee who lived at Dakshineswar temple garden and was of a perverse disposition, admonished Sri Ramakrishna for his attachment to the youngsters, he was really perturbed. He prayed to the Divine Mother for guidance. Referring to this Sri Ramakrishna says: ‘I said to the Divine Mother: “Mother, Hazra admonishes me for worrying about Narendra and the other young boys. He asks me why I forget God and think about these youngsters.” No sooner did this thought arise in my mind, than the Divine Mother revealed to me in a flash that it is She Herself who has become man. But She manifested Herself most clearly through a pure soul.’

Without a mention of the various ways in which he enjoyed the realization of the



Most High, we will not be able to have an idea of his all-consuming love of God. He practised the Tantrik, the Vaishnava, and the Vedanta modes of approach to the Godhead. And when he had finished the whole gamut of the Hindu way of spiritual practices, and realized the goal of all these several paths, he wanted to know how the Mohammedans prayed to God. No sooner had this thought crossed his mind than a Muslim Fakir came to the temple garden, and Sri Ramakrishna learnt from him the Islamic way of approach to Reality and realized the Highest through that path as well. He then contemplated on Jesus and had His vision too. At last he came to the definite conclusion that the so many views were as many paths to the one Reality, up-holding as it were the statement, of the most ancient Rishis of India, 'Truth is one, sages call It variously'.<sup>9</sup> He used to say, 'Why should I be like a one-stringed instrument. I enjoy the presence of God through many ways. When I was initiated into the Vedantic disciplines I prayed to the Mother "Mother, do not make me a dry Vedantin".'

We have given some of the incidents in Sri Ramakrishna's life to show how all through he was conscious of the Highest. This would not, however, have helped the world, had he not practised spiritual disciplines himself and emphasized their necessity; if he had not showed how to attain God-consciousness. People talk lightly of the guru: that the system of guru and sisya is a relic of the past superstition; that spiritual life is possible without any outside aid. Sri Ramakrishna, on the other hand, took the aid of many teachers even after scaling the heights of spiritual peaks to affirm the importance of the guru. His directions regarding the necessity of a guru in spiritual life are unambiguous. Let us listen to what he says: 'One must get instruction from his guru. If a man is initiated by a human guru, he will not achieve anything if he regards his guru as a mere man. The guru should be regarded as the direct manifestation of God. Only then can the disciple have faith in the Mantra given by the guru.'

'A sadhaka has to sever the eightfold fetters that bind man down to this earth if he has to win the grace of the Mother,' said Sri Ramakrishna to his nephew and attendant, Hriday, in the early period of his sadhana at Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna was at that time spending his nights in the woods of the temple garden, meditating on the Divine. He used to put off his sacred thread, the symbol of Brahminism and sit for meditation. Hriday, who had followed him one night to see what he was doing there at dead of night, felt scandalized at this behaviour of his uncle. He went near Sri Ramakrishna and upbraided him for his sacrilegious act. It was then that the Master had told him that shame in taking the name of God, pride of birth, contempt for others, fear and the like were the impediments in the way of approach to God. Here Sri Ramakrishna gives us a practical lesson on the way to God-consciousness. Like all great preceptors, Sri Ramakrishna too laid stress on keeping the company of the holy. In his sayings and talks even the smallest amongst us can find some practical hints for our spiritual uplift and that is the beauty of Sri Ramakrishna's utterances: the abstruse truths are brought home to us in the simplest language and the homeliest parables.

In a world full of the darkness of material-consciousness Sri Ramakrishna came with his select band of disciples to re-infuse the light of God-consciousness; to be as a beacon light and to reinvigorate humanity spiritually.

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<sup>1</sup> Gita, 7.3.



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- <sup>2</sup> Katha U. 2.6.  
<sup>3</sup> Gita, 4.37.  
<sup>4</sup> Bhagavata, X.30.44.  
<sup>5</sup> Ibid., XI.12.12.  
<sup>6</sup> N.B.Sutras 10.  
<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 19.  
<sup>8</sup> Mundaka 2.2.5.  
<sup>9</sup> Rig Veda.



**Swami Paratparananda**

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***Ideal is not illusory***

Many are the dreams and imageries of a boyhood. Many are the ambitions and plans of the adolescent youth. But much of these remain unrealized. They remain only as illusive visions. The nightmares of this matter-of-fact world crush out most of these beautiful dreams. But man understands this not. On the other hand in spiritual life when anyone speaks of an ideal, he is immediately put down as an idealist. And this very word brings out a smile on the lips of the so-called realist, puts a jeering laugh into the mouth of a naturalist or materialist. They point him out as a dreamer on a wild goose chase.

But is idealism such an evil? That is the question. As we see, in daily life, most people set out ambitions for themselves; they may not call it an ideal; but that matters little. What goads such people to work, sometimes to the very verge of death, many times to death itself? Ambition to reach the ideal state, in which they think they will have peace of mind and unbounded pleasure. So pleasure is their ideal. But can man have unalloyed pleasure? All agree on this point, that it is not possible. Even the seeker after pleasure knows it, but he thinks that he is going to make the best of a bad bargain. This is only a face saving device; it is like having been stuck up in the quagmire pretending to be at prayer. The pretender does not know that the quagmire may soon act like quicksand and swallow him up. So, it is actually the materialist, who puts his faith in pragmatic values, that is after the will-o-the-wisp and not the spiritual idealist. It is again the so-called realist who is out to be disillusioned when he realizes what he considered real was after all only like water in the mirage, a semblance, a ghost, a shadow and not the real.

***What is idealism***

Idealism has been variously interpreted and defined. We shall not go into all the details here, but try to know what the Hindu philosophers point out as idealism. The term 'idea' plays a very prominent part in Hindu philosophy and to some extent we can say in other religions too. There is the Upanisadic statement: 'In the beginning this was only Sat (Existence), one without a second. . . . It thought, let Me be many.'<sup>1</sup> Here it is stated that the creation came into being because of the idea in the Reality to manifest Itself. This is so in every sphere of activity in life. Without the idea, the thought, nothing creative is possible. In other words the ideal is the motive force, the dynamic power behind the working of this universe. To know the nature of this ultimate reality in the above sense is Idealism. This again is too abstract an 'idea' to be grasped by ordinary individuals, and still



less practicable in their case. Yet it will not do to neglect the need of the common man. At least our Sastras did not maintain that 'highbrowed' attitude. They are solicitous like the mother for the welfare of humanity. So the Srutis prescribed various types of disciplines and graded them to suit the temperament and evolvment of the individual. Yet all of these are only ideas. These ideas can be understood only when they materialize into the concrete.

### ***Ideal in the concrete***

It seems paradoxical to say that the ideal can manifest in the concrete. But if it were not to manifest, the ideal would have remained only an idea, a poetical concept, and there would have been no motive force to move man on his onward march to know the Ultimate Reality.

Let us now try to understand what we mean by 'the ideal' here. One meaning of the word ideal, that the dictionaries also give, is the 'perfect type'. Here there is no visionary conception. We set before us a concrete example of the standard which we want to attain: perfect men, or God-men, like Krishna, Buddha, Christ or Ramakrishna are the examples. So it is not an airy something which man wants to attain, but perfection as exemplified in these persons. Perfection not after death, in some other world, but here and now. Here again the spiritual man is more definite. He does not want any uncertain external material aid. For, whatever is gained by material help cannot be eternal, because it is a thing that is caused, a degradation, a degeneration and is certain to deteriorate, to decay and to be destroyed. It is the law of nature that a compound is unstable, its tendency is to go back to its elements. That is also what the Upanishads say.<sup>2</sup>

What is meant by perfection in this context? Only one thing can be perfect and that is the Atman, Brahman or God, which is said to be of the nature of eternal purity, eternal consciousness, and eternal freedom. It is the manifesting of this perfection that is in man, that is called religion says Swami Vivekananda. For, we cannot manifest what is not already in us. Christ also says, 'The Kingdom of heaven is within you.' What is it then that covers our nature? Our desires, our being extrovert, our running after things that are unreal. But it is also certain that this nature of ours cannot be annihilated. Even in the material world we experience this. For example, the nature of fire is to burn, we have not found at any time fire losing its power to burn and still being called as fire. We cannot say, therefore, you can come across cold fire. But it is possible that the fire may be covered with ashes, and may not be perceivable for the time being. Likewise the Atman may be covered by ignorance but its nature cannot be destroyed. So all our efforts are to uncover this Self, this Atman, to know our true being.

Now to manifest the divine we have to get rid of the veils; veils of body, senses and mind. Are we then to court death? Not at all. For there is no certainty that the soul thus forcibly relieved from one cage will not enter into another. On the contrary our Sastras say it does take up more and more bodies, according to the desires most prominent at the moment of its release. 'I shall tell you now the eternal secret as to what happens to the Atman after it leaves the body. For the sake of embodiment it enters other wombs according to its actions in this world, and according to its knowledge, sometimes it takes the form even as immovable things like trees and plants,'<sup>3</sup> says Yama in the *Kathopanisad*.

### ***Practice & Renunciation***



But there are other ways of overcoming this transmigration. What are they? We have here to recall that all paths, which speak of realization of Brahman, emphasize on tranquillization of the mind, on equanimity. This is the prime and foremost condition for the reflection of the Infinite in the mind. For, as when the surface of a lake is disturbed the reflection of even the most proximate object is hazy or unperceivable, so also the mind lake when in a wave form cannot catch the reflection of the Atman, which is next to it.

This serenity of the mind is what is called yoga, says Patanjali. It is to be acquired by renunciation, and practice,<sup>4</sup> which are, as it were, the systole and diastole of the heart, or the hub and spokes of the wheel of spiritual life. One without the other cannot be thought of. And to posit one without the other is to make a parody of religion. Sri Krishna too says in the Gita, 'O son of Kunti! This (mind) can be controlled by practice and dispassion.'<sup>5</sup> Every religious leader says that, and acts up to it.

Swami Vivekananda relates a story from the Æsop's Fables to show why perseverance is necessary: 'A fine looking stag is looking at his young one, "How powerful I am, look at my splendid head, look at my limbs, how strong and muscular they are; and how swiftly I can run." In the meantime he hears the barking of dogs in the distance, and immediately takes to his heels, and after he has run several miles, he comes back panting. The young one says, "You just told me how strong you are, how was it that when the dogs barked, you ran away?" "Yes, my son; but when the dogs bark all my confidence vanishes." Such is the case with us. We think highly of humanity, we feel ourselves strong and valiant, we make grand resolves; but when the "dogs" of trial and temptation bark, we are like the stag in the fable. Then, if such is the case what is the use of teaching all these things? There is the greatest use. The use is this, that perseverance will finally conquer. Nothing can be done in a day.'

### *Necessity of an ideal*

This practice becomes easy when we take hold of some ideal, have before us the example of some great personality who has attained perfection. And this is one of the methods which Patanjali asks us to adopt as an assistance to our concentration: 'Meditation on the heart that has given up all attachment to sense objects.'<sup>6</sup>

What a torment is this life! to be dragged by two forces set diametrically opposite, we mean the temptations that come in the form of sense pleasures and the desire to be free, free of all shackles! Confronted with such a situation, the life of those who are free of all attachment to the sense-pleasures, puts some hope into our hearts. They light our paths and lighten our burden. They are as it were, ever ready to take our burden. Sri Krishna exhorts in the Gita, 'Giving up all duties, take shelter in Me alone. I shall free you from all sins, do not grieve.'<sup>7</sup> Christ says, 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'<sup>8</sup> Sri Ramakrishna too said, to some of his disciples specially those who were hard pressed for time, 'Visit here (meaning himself) now and then and you will achieve everything.' That kind of assurance the God-men alone can give. Even the remembrance of those personalities washes off all dross, drives away all vulgar ideas from our minds. Sri Ramakrishna relates a story to illustrate this: 'Some friends said to Ravana: "You have been assuming different forms for Sita. Why don't you go to her in the form of Rama?" Ravana replied, "When I contemplate Rama, even the position of Brahma appears insignificant to me, not to speak of the company of another man's wife! How could I take the form of Rama for such a purpose?' Such is the sanctifying power of these God-men.



Such are to be our ideals.

Swami Vivekananda remarks; 'The ideal is far away, no doubt, but at the same time, we know that we must have it. We must have even the highest ideal. Unfortunately in this life, the vast majority of persons are groping through this dark life without any ideal at all. If a man with an ideal makes a thousand mistakes, I am sure that the man without an ideal makes fifty thousand. Therefore, it is better to have an ideal. And this ideal we must hear about as much as we can, till it enters into our hearts, into our brains, into our veins, until it tingles in every drop of our blood, and permeates in our body. We must meditate upon it.'

Again he observes, 'It is a great thing to take up a grand ideal in life and then give up one's whole life to it. For what otherwise is the value of life, this vegetating, little, low, life of man? Subordinating it to one high ideal is the only value that life has. Live for an ideal, and that one ideal alone. Let it be so great, so strong, that there may be nothing else left in the mind; no place for anything else, no time for anything else.' And when that ideal is the Highest, it revolutionizes, transmutes man's life, ennobles him. He becomes a force unto himself, not for self-seeking but for the welfare of the world.

### *Different ideals*

The very fact that there are so many religions, so many sects and creeds, and that they still thrive in spite of all efforts to the contrary, shows that there is a need for this variety in the creation. These sects and creeds serve the inner cravings of certain particular temperaments and are very necessary for their growth. Just as you cannot make the water animals to live on land, nor can force the land animals to live in water, so it is no use prescribing one method, one path and one ideal for all. The ideals are for the progress of man in his spiritual life, not for his regression.

Now, growth is possible when there is freedom of thought and action. Observe a plant that is growing in the lap of nature and put one in a room shaded from sun and protected from wind, the former grows healthy and strong and yields plenty, whereas the latter grows weak and lank, and yields nothing.

The different types of vegetation we see from the Equator to the Poles is another illustration of this variety in creation. Similarly even in this age when distance is no distance, owing to the speedy communication and fast travelling, a cross section of the world's population will reveal a wonderful, divergent and colourful pageant of life, customs, and manners. As in external life, so in internal life too man varies in development and aptitudes. So the variety is inevitable.

Swami Vivekananda remarks: 'Every man should take up his own ideal and endeavour to accomplish it. That is a surer way of progress than taking up other men's ideals, which he can never hope to accomplish. For instance, we take a child and at once give him the task of walking twenty miles. Either the little one dies, or one in a thousand crawls the twenty miles, to reach the end exhausted and half-dead. That is like what we generally try to do with the world. All the men and women, in any society, are not of the same mind, capacity, or of the same power to do things; they must have different ideals, and we have no right to sneer at any ideal. Let every one do the best he can for realizing his own ideal.'



### ***Unity in variety***

However, we must understand that these are only the outer embellishments and they will naturally be varied, but there is a unity in the background, just as vegetation, however varied, has the earth's soil as its ground. Sri Krishna says, 'In Me all this is woven like the pearls on a string.'<sup>9</sup> Swami Vivekananda observes regarding the different ideals of the past: 'It is the duty of Vedanta to establish this connecting thread, however incongruous or disgusting may seem these ideas when judged according to the conceptions of to-day. These ideas, in the setting of past times, were harmonious, and not more hideous than our present ideas. It is only when we try to take them out of their settings and apply to our own present circumstances that the hideousness becomes obvious.'

### ***Devotion to the ideal***

It is only when we love the ideal that we make real progress in life. It is only then that a tremendous power is generated in us. It is only then that even extreme sacrifice is possible without a wrench of pain at the heart, nay the pain itself turns to bliss. 'Devotion to one ideal is the only method for the beginner, but with devotion and sincerity it will lead to all. Nistha (devotion to one ideal) is, in a manner, placing the plant in the tub, shielding the struggling soul in its path,' observes Swamiji. He reiterates, 'You must have a great devotion to your ideal, devotion not of the moment, but calm, persevering and steady devotion, like that of a Chataka (a kind of bird) which looks into the sky in the midst of thunder and lightning and would drink no water but from the clouds. Perish in the struggle to be holy; a thousand times welcome death.'

There is always the error committed by man, the error of misconstruction, the error of judgement. He is apt to jump to conclusions, not warranted by statements or situation. We have to guard against committing this folly. So when our teachers say that we should be devoted to our ideal we should not misconstrue that they want us to hate other ideals or be intolerant of them. 'But I say unto you which hear, love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you,'<sup>10</sup> said Christ. Why? because he knew no waters of love can flow in the terrible desert of hatred; they would dry up in no time. But to root out hatred is a herculean task, no doubt, but there is no other way to perfection. Swami Vivekananda says, 'Charity never faileth; devotion to an ideal never fails in sympathy, never becomes weary of sympathizing with others. Love to enemies is not possible for ordinary men; they drive out others in order to live themselves. Only a very few men lived in the world who practised it.'

### ***Should not lower the ideal***

Another risk we run here is of lowering the ideal, seeing that its empyrean heights are not easily accessible. But with that degradation sets in. With that we begin to tread the downward slippery path and once we slip there is no knowing where we will be. That is why Swamiji warns us, 'There are two tendencies in human nature, one to harmonize the ideal with the life, and the other to elevate the life to the ideal. It is a great thing to understand this, for the former tendency is the temptation of our lives. I think that I can only do a certain class of work. Most of it, perhaps, is bad; most of it, perhaps, has a motive power of passion behind it, anger or greed or selfishness. When a man brings an



ideal which can be reconciled with my selfishness, I am glad at once, and jump at it.' We must be alert and avoid creating such a situation. In another context Swamiji exhorts, 'Let a few stand out and live for God alone and save religion for the world. Do not pretend to be like Janaka when you are only the "progenitor" of delusions. Be honest and say, "I see the ideal but I cannot yet approach it"; but do not pretend to give up when you do not. If you give up stand fast. You must struggle towards the ideal, and if a man comes who wants to bring that ideal down to your level, and teach a religion that does not carry that highest ideal, do not listen to him. Beware when anyone is trying to apologise for sense vanities and sense weaknesses. If anyone wants to preach that way to us, poor, sense-bound clods of earth as we have made ourselves, by following that teaching we shall never progress. . . . Take care that you do not swerve an inch from the ideal. . . . The ideal should never be lowered.' We need not dilate on this point for the teaching is clear.

### *Realization of the ideal*

The ideal is to be realized and not merely thought of, or intellectually grasped. The Upanisad says, 'Atman is to be seen; to be heard, to be pondered over and meditated upon.'<sup>1</sup> The first injunction is the goal, the rest is the process to reach it. There is no hesitation here. Srutis do not mince matters. They definitely say it is to be seen. They do not encourage indolence or idleness. That is suicidal to the spiritual life of the aspirant.

We have all heard of the four paths that lead to God. Till now one or the other of these were exclusively practised, but Sri Ramakrishna has proved that they need not necessarily be exclusive. He showed that they can be practised in combination too. Man is endowed with the faculties of feeling, thinking and willing. And we can add to these his capacity for action. Sri Ramakrishna's plan of action did not exclude any one of these traits of man. He desired man to grow into a harmonious whole and not one-sided. He is the example of his own precept. He attained the dizzy heights of the philosophic speculation, viz., the Nirvikalpa Samadhi, yet he retained the attitude of a devotee. He was a past master in Yoga and rendered service to humanity which it can never forget.

Even in the process of development he wanted us to utilize our faculties and this he illustrated by the example of the goldsmith at his work: of melting gold in the crucible. The goldsmith uses the blowpipe with his mouth, the bellows with his hand to kindle the fire, to produce the intense heat and stops not till the gold is melted and put into the cast. Sri Ramakrishna's advice to his devotees was to be up and doing, to use one or all methods and realize the ideal, God. And realization of the ideal depends mostly on one's own efforts. Patanjali says, 'The success of Yogis differs according as the means they adopt are mild, medium or intense.'<sup>2</sup>

In this age the ideal path to God-realization would be as laid down by Sri Ramakrishna; for as he himself has said, it is not possible to get rid of the body idea, by denying the needs of the body, as is required of a jnani; at the same time, mere stress on bhakti may lead to sentimentalism. So he said keep the knowledge of Vedanta in your pocket and work; at another time he advised us to follow the path of bhakti tempered with jnana. Let us, therefore, not forget that the ideal of life is God, and to realize Him is the highest end.

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<sup>1</sup> Chandogya Up., VI. li. 1 & 3.

<sup>2</sup> Katha Up., 2.10.



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<sup>3</sup> Kathopanishad, V, 6.7.

<sup>4</sup> Yoga Sutra, 1.12.

<sup>5</sup> Gita, VI.35.

<sup>6</sup> Yoga Sutra, 1.37.

<sup>7</sup> Gita, 18.66.

<sup>8</sup> Gospel of St. Mathew, 11.28.

<sup>9</sup> Gita, 7.7.

<sup>10</sup> St. Luke, 6.27&28.

<sup>11</sup> Br.Up., 2.4.5.

<sup>12</sup> Yoga Sutras of patanjali, 1-22.



**Swami Paratparananda**

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Religion, to most people all the world over, consists in belief in some doctrines, in some personalities, in some creeds, and at the most doing good to members professing the same faith or with the hope of getting them converted to their faith. Beyond that they cannot think. This position is understandable in the case of persons of the common run. But it is intriguing when people who profess to live for religion and religion alone also run along the same ruts. By this they not only do harm to themselves but lead their flock intentionally and deliberately astray.

There was a time when these narrow conceptions would not have affected even the fringe of humanity. But now, on account of the vast network of communications, when the world has dwindled in size, as it were, all caution is to be observed when we say things which fail to carry conviction with the rational man of today, or vilify persons, or faiths. Not that the religion or persons thus vilified lose anything of their vitality or influence but the vilifiers themselves expose their ignorance of the trend of events, their insularity, and warped way of thinking, and also do harm to the cause of religion as a whole, by such an attitude. There have been criticisms in certain quarters that ‘Vedantins do not know God, as the Transcendent One, the Creator.’ We shall endeavour here to show how totally misunderstood, misrepresented and biased this saying is.

### ***What is Religion?***

In this connection first of all it is incumbent on us to know: What religion is, and what our conception of God is. At the very outset we may say, that religion is a way of life that leads us onwards towards God, helps to discover our true nature. This is the elementary definition. In this sense, in Sanskrit, it is called *dharma*. However, this word *dharma* has got different meanings according to the different contexts. It means duty, righteousness, morality, inherent nature, and religion according to usage. Yet it can be seen that all through the several meanings the main purport of the word is not lost sight of. Other meanings are stages for the final end, religion. Duty well done clears vision, ensures righteousness, perfects nature and finally instils conviction regarding the purpose of life. That is what religions try to do. And about this there is no dispute.

It is also true that almost all religions accept that the soul continues to live after the death of the body. This too is the common ground where there is no disputation. Most religions positively affirm that the soul either goes to a heavenly abode or is condemned to hell, — whatever may be the description of the hell or heaven given by them. Thus the aim of



all religions is to elevate the brute in man to a higher pedestal, the human. We are deliberately abstaining from the use of any other epithet, at present, in this context, lest that word should frighten some who cannot view man except as a conglomeration of mind and body. And to lift man from the lower to a higher level a variety of creeds and paraphernalia, symbols and insignia, were introduced by various sages, seers, prophets and Incarnations, to suit the variegated types of humanity. From this it naturally follows that creeds or dogmas are not the whole of religion; neither does mere philosophy or learning constitute it. These are only the pathways to the Highest.

In other words attaining perfection, freedom is the goal of religion. Everything in the world works for freedom knowingly or unknowingly. Evolution of species which had once upset the religious moorings in the West, the Vedanta explains as the proof of the involved soul trying to attain more and more freedom. It is not the matter, dead and inert, that does it but the soul behind it. This is the difference between the living and the dead, that while in the living there is struggle for more and more freedom, in the dead it is all bondage. Swami Vivekananda says: 'This effort to attain freedom underlies all forms of worship, whether we know it or not.' Wherever we find worship, — in howsoever rudimentary form it may be, howsoever crude it may appear to us — there is that desire to obtain more freedom, by propitiating what the worshippers believe as higher and more powerful beings. 'This longing for freedom' remarks Swami Vivekananda, 'produces the idea of a Being who is absolutely free.' This Being who is eternally pure, eternally free, omniscient, and omnipotent is called God. And He is the basis of religion.

Man's concept of God, however, is diverse. Notwithstanding the divergent views regarding God, that there need be no fight over it has been amply proved in recent times by Sri Ramakrishna, by his practice of the disciplines and realizations of the ultimate of those very sects and religions which were considered inimical to one another. At the end of these practices he attained the same goal. Variety need not frighten us. Because there is a unity underlying this variety. Religion anywhere means attaining the Most High. When we have reached It, then only we have religion worth the name. That is why Swami Vivekananda repeatedly said, 'Religion is realization and not learning or argument.' This is the primary meaning of religion. All else is secondary or even tertiary. Have we realized God? Then we have religion. Do we at least attempt to reach Him? Then we are on the path of religion. Mere denunciation or condemnation of another is not religion. Nevertheless, we more often than not, behave like the blind men who went to find out how an elephant looked. Each touching some one part of that animal, described it as a pillar, a rope, a winnowing fan and the like. Likewise people with prejudiced minds refuse to concede that God can be anything except what they think Him to be. Is God, who they profess is all-powerful, and all-knowing, so small that they can know all of Him with their little minds? But that is exactly what most people are doing. They want to put a ban, as it were, on Him from being anything else. They must be thinking themselves more powerful and wiser than God, for who else can dictate terms, to others than a person more powerful than them. Such a proposition by its incongruity will make even a man in the street laugh.

### *Vedantin's Concept of God*

What is the Vedantin's concept of God? The Vedantin says: God is *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Existence-Knowledge-Bliss). Existence that is eternal, knowledge that is infinite, and Bliss that is endless. Even we exist because of that Existence. He is the essence of our knowledge,



and even the highest happiness a man enjoys in this world is an infinitesimal fraction of that Bliss. Further, the Vedanta says, 'From whom these beings are born, in whom these created beings live; towards whom they all hasten and into whom they all enter again, know that. That is Brahman.'<sup>1</sup> This is not a solitary instance where the Upanisads try to infuse into us this idea. In the Chandogya Upanisad there is the injunction 'All this is verily Brahman; meditate on It with a calm mind, knowing this to have been come out of It, merges in It, and has its station in It.'<sup>2</sup>

Many more passages can be quoted in support of the theory of Vedanta that this world has come out of Brahman, God; but these are sufficient to convince the critics of Vedanta, if they keep an open mind, and to see for themselves the depth of their folly. As the saying goes, one man may lead a horse to the water but ten cannot make it drink, so in case people have shut the doors of their mind and are determined not to be convinced no one can help them. A sleeping man can be awakened but not one who is pretending sleep.

### *Where Vedanta Excels*

Vedanta says that the inner core of our being, the life of our life, the soul of our soul is God, is Brahman. Very few can understand this even intellectually. They are frightened when Vedanta boldly asserts that divinity is man's birthright. It is his heritage. Only he has forgotten it. A beautiful illustration has been given in one of the Upanisads to bring home this truism. 'All beings experience this Brahman every day in their state of deep sleep (when the real nature reigns supreme by itself). Yet like the person who is heir to immense wealth, though walking over the place where the gold is hidden, does not attain it, being ignorant of its existence, so also man, whose real nature, which is Brahman, covered by ignorance in the form of desires (such as hunger, lust and the like), does not know it though daily he goes into (experiences) it.'<sup>3</sup>

What a wonderful concept of man is placed before us by Vedanta: 'Heirs of Immortality.'<sup>4</sup> With these words Swami Vivekananda introduced the concept of man according to Vedanta to the audience at one of the sessions of the Parliament of Religions. 'Enough,' said he to the people of India, 'have we been fed by negative ideas. Rise up, be heroes. The divine is in you. Manifest it.' Does a son of an aristocrat, if he knows it, cringe before others for some paltry things? This is the excellent idea Vedanta teaches us.

We are very familiar with our birth-rights; we fight and stake our all in litigation in order to prove our rights, or demand our heritage. But the most precious of all our heritage, our own Atman, we forget to claim and beggar ourselves for a petty this or a paltry that. We cling to our body as the *alpha* and *omega* of our life. This clinging to our false personality is the bane of man. As he believes himself to be a person possessed of body and mind and nothing more than that, he wants to see his God too as a person. Vedanta does not say it is wrong. It even encourages this concept. For it knows that as soon as the man has his perfected nature manifesting itself in him, he will be no more narrow and bigoted. We are reminded here how Sri Ramakrishna taught this lesson to 'M', the writer of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. 'M' had come to Dakshineswar for the second time. Being educated in the Western sciences he was rationalistic in his outlook. 'M' thought that the people who worshipped images should be asked to have God in view while they did so and should not worship clay or stone. The Master's sharp rebuke on that occasion stilled 'M's' nature of arguing for ever. Sri Ramakrishna said: 'That's the one hobby of you Calcutta people — giving lectures and bringing others to the light! Nobody ever stops to consider how to get the



light himself. Who are you to teach others?

‘He who is the Lord of the Universe will teach everyone. He alone teaches us, who has created this universe; who has made the sun and moon, men and beasts, and all other beings; who has provided means for their sustenance; who has given children parents and endowed them with love to bring them up. The Lord has done so many things — will He not show people the way to worship Him? If they need teaching, then He will be the Teacher. He is our Inner Guide.

‘Suppose there is an error in worshipping the clay image; doesn’t God know that through it He alone is being invoked? He will be pleased with that very worship. Why should you get a headache over it? You had better try for knowledge and devotion yourself.’

To those who will hear, Vedanta has something more to give. It says your real nature is Brahman: ‘That thou art.’

### ***Misapprehension about Vedanta***

The real misapprehension starts here, at this stage. How can that infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent Being be said to have become limited in a cage of flesh and bones? What further blasphemy can there be than this? Ask those to whom this is a strange, and fantastic idea. We all know how even an intellectual giant, like Swami Vivekananda, with a religious bent of mind even from the birth, so to say, at the beginning of his spiritual career had difficulty in accepting, nay rebelled against this concept: ‘All this is Brahman’; we also know how the Master brought home this truth to his beloved disciple by his mystic touch; and how later on Swamiji himself scaled the dizzy heights of this realization. No wonder then that if people who are not brought up in the tradition fail to grasp the import of the passage and prattle in their own way. However, if there is a genuine desire to know, if there are not the preconceived ideas to obstruct, hamper and mutilate their vision, it is not so difficult to understand this grand notion, intellectually at least. By this we do not mean that every one should become a Vedantin. It is not possible. Being fully aware of the fact that all men are not of identical taste and mental development, the Vedas themselves have prescribed, such things as sacrifices to prepare man for the highest end. Now what the Vedantin asks of all is not to be dogmatic, when they say man is this or that, when they want to say that God is such and such. Remember the saying ‘in my father’s house are many mansions’; we may be living in one and our brothers in a second and a third. Should we on that account hate or despise those who live in other mansions? The Vedantin has no quarrel with anyone except bigots and fanatics who are out to kill the spirit of religion itself.

### ***Real Import of the Mahavakyas***

Now let us understand what is the actual meaning of the mahavakyas which are of so confusing a nature: *Tattvamasi*, *Aham Brahmasmi* etc. First of all, if we know to whom those truths were taught in the days gone by, much of the cloudiness and mistiness which enshrouds our understanding will clear away. Of yore the disciples, at a very impressionable age, sought the teacher, lived with him, served him and learnt from him, as well as by his life. That was the mode of teaching then. The teacher knew the student thoroughly, his propensities, his aptitudes, his intellectual acumen and more than that his spiritual potentials.

In the *Prasnopanishad* there is a story. Six disciples approach a sage named Pippalada seeking knowledge. The sage asks the disciples: ‘Live again here observing austerities,



chastity, with shraddha and serving the guru for a year more. After that ask questions on subjects which each of you desire to know, I shall answer, if I happen to know them.’<sup>5</sup> This was the method of approach: To teach what one desired to know.

Thus the flint would be getting ready by discipline under the teacher and when the opportune moment came the teacher struck, and the fire of knowledge was kindled. When this ground had been prepared, when the disciple was thoroughly tested and found fit, he was taught the highest truth. So ‘That thou art’ or ‘I am Brahman’ does not mean that the individual who is called Mr. So and So is Brahman. To understand these great teachings in this manner would be disastrous to one’s spiritual life. An example of this perverted understanding is also presented to us in the *Chandogya Upanisad* in the form of a story, as a fore-warning.

Once Prajapati (the Creator) announced, ‘the Atman, which is untouched by impurity, devoid of old age, deathless, griefless, not liable to hunger and thirst, whose desires come true, whose thoughts come true, is to be sought after, is to be known. One who understands It having been taught (by a teacher), obtains all the worlds and all desires.’<sup>6</sup>

Hearing about it Indra among the gods and Virochana among the demons approached Prajapati with due respect and after living for sometime and serving Him requested Him to teach them that highest knowledge. Prajapati said: ‘The Purusa that is seen in the eye that is the Atman. This is immortal, fearless. This is Brahman.’<sup>7</sup> They asked which was the Atman, that which was reflected in the mirror or that which was reflected in water. Prajapati first asked them to see as they were in water and again after adorning themselves with ornaments etc. Being still not of the required purity of mind, they could not assess the meaning of these instructions of Prajapati. Describing the reflection each time they asked whether that as the Atman that he meant. Prajapati only repeated his previous formula ‘This is the Atman, This is Immortal, fearless. This is Brahman.’

Pleased at heart both of them went away thinking that they had known all. Prajapati seeing them go away satisfied said; ‘They are going away without understanding the Self. But whoever goes away, whether gods or demons, without understanding this knowledge will perish.’<sup>8</sup>

Of the two Virochana firmly believed that what Prajapati meant by Atman was the body, and went away perfectly satisfied and taught his followers to build up their bodies. But Indra being a little more thoughtful doubted this doctrine and approaching again and again, learnt the real import of Prajapati’s teaching. Now who was responsible for Virochana’s fault? His own lack of reflectiveness, lack of introspectiveness. So, if some in the world even in the present day cannot understand the true import of these great teachings or thoroughly and purposefully misunderstand them, the Srutis are not at fault, neither the teacher who imparts the teachings, but those people themselves.

### ***Body, mind and soul***

The Hindu concept is that man has a body and a mind. This difference becomes more explicit if we take an example. When a person dies the Hindu says he has given up the body. This usage is significant. Here it is clear that the Hindu considers this body as an instrument of the soul. When the soul had worked out the usefulness of the body it discards that one and takes another. Thus it transmigrates from body to body until it reaches that perfection, which is its inherent nature. Then the soul is said to have been liberated. This element which is apparently shifting its centre time and again, is called the Atman by Vedanta. We have now



two, rather three things that go to form 'man': the body, the mind and the soul. Out of these the first two are, say our scriptures, material in composition; body is made of gross matter and mind of subtle matter. Soul is the essence of man and being of the nature of consciousness it makes the body live, move and have its being. This is the preliminary stage of Vedanta. Sruti believes in the gradual progress of man, leading him from 'lower truth to higher truth'. Just as a few only can stand the sudden and extreme changes in climate, so too, very few can sustain the shock of sudden transformation. It is also true that all cannot climb to the storey of a building by pole-vaulting, many require the staircase. This is the plan of the Upanisads also.

Now, the second stage is that the Atman (the self or the Soul) is a part of the infinite Brahman, of God. 'As from a blazing fire myriads of sparks identical in appearance fly out similarly from this Immutable varied beings are born and again absorbed into it,' says the Sruti. If and when people come to distinguish between their Self and body, this theory will not be so hard to digest. And then, the words like 'Heirs of Immortality', 'each soul is potentially divine', may not sound so bewildering. On the other hand there is every possibility that people who were first frightened at these words will understand them (now) in the clearer context.

But the aim of the scriptures is not to have a half-way house. They stand for truth, and truth does not depend on anybody's acceptance or rejection of it. The law of gravitation was there and would have been there even if Newton had not found it out. Sruti then goes on to the final stage. It asserts: 'All this is Brahman.' 'There are not many things in this world.' 'That Thou Art.' These are the teachings which preach the identity, rather unity in the variety. No doubt, this is a big leap into the Unknown, only not into the dark but into light. Few are fit to achieve it, but on that account we have no right to demean it. 'Accept all ideals as true, but stick to your own,' said Sri Ramakrishna. If we follow this advice there arises no necessity to pass strictures on others' views.

### ***Religion is not Fanaticism***

Finally it is not to be forgotten that dogmatism, bigotry and fanaticism have nothing to do with religion. There is a vast gulf of difference between the former three and the latter. Fanaticism is incompatible with true religion. Swami Vivekananda pointed out, 'Fanatics cannot work, they waste three-fourths of their energy. It is the level-headed, calm, practical man who works.' Again on other occasions he remarked, 'These fanatics may do some good, according to their light, but much more harm.' Bringing out the childish impishness dominant in fanaticism Swamiji said: 'When I was a boy I thought fanaticism was a great element in work, but now, as I grow older, I find out that it is not.'

An incident in Swamiji's life, which he related to an audience in the West, brings out the meaning of fanaticism clearly: 'I had a book sent me, which said I must believe everything told in it. It said there was no soul, but that there were gods and goddesses in heaven, and a thread of light going from each of our heads to heaven! How did the writer know all these things? She had been inspired, and wanted me to believe it too, and because I refused, she said, "You must be a very bad man; there is no hope for you!" This is fanaticism.' What a toll of human life fanaticism has taken can be best known from history. 'Fanatics make only hatred,' warned Swamiji. History has proved this. Rivers of innocent blood have flown on this earth, inquisitions have been held and all this was done for fanaticism's sake. Can real religion have anything to do with these things? Religion



preaches, ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’ and what does fanaticism do, quite the reverse. Let us, therefore eschew fanaticism from our midst and learn to live amicably.

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<sup>1</sup> Taittiriyaopanishad, 3-1.

<sup>2</sup> Chandogya, III.14.1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. VIII.3.2.

<sup>4</sup> Svetasvatara Upanishad, 2.5.

<sup>5</sup> Prasna Up., 1.2.

<sup>6</sup> Chandogya Up., 8.7.1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.7.4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 8.8.4.

<sup>9</sup> Mundaka Up., 2.1.1.